

## 7. Excavation of an early medieval ‘plectrum-shaped’ enclosure at Newtown, County Limerick

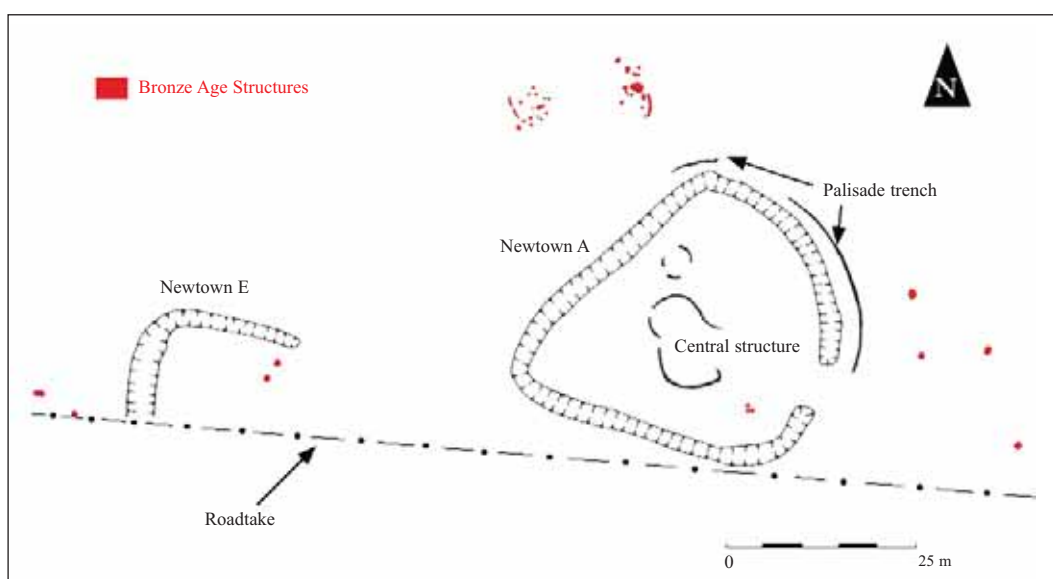
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*Illus. 1—Location of site at Newtown, Co. Limerick (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)*

The site at Newtown was first identified in 2001 during a large-scale, pre-construction ploughing and test-trenching project before construction of the Limerick Southern Ring Road Phase I. There was no trace of the archaeological features above the ground before investigation. The site was to the east of Limerick city (Illus. 1), in the townland of Newtown (NGR 162550, 155850; height 30 m OD; excavation licence no. 01E0214). The excavation was funded by the National Roads Authority, through Limerick County Council.

Two distinct phases of activity were identified at this site: a prehistoric Bronze Age phase represented by two structures, interpreted as houses, and a cemetery containing quantities of funerary pottery; and a subsequent reuse of the site in the early medieval period (Illus. 2). This paper concentrates on the early medieval phase of activity. This was represented by a ‘plectrum-shaped’ enclosure (identified as Newtown A) containing a figure-of-eight structure, which was partly constructed on top of the Bronze Age cemetery. (The two Bronze Age houses were situated to the north of the plectrum-shaped enclosure.) Part of a possible second enclosure (identified as Newtown E) was also excavated. This extended beyond the area affected by the road scheme, and so its full extent could not be ascertained. It was situated to the west of the plectrum-shaped enclosure.



Illus. 2—Plan of excavated features at Newtown (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

### The plectrum-shaped enclosure (Newtown A)

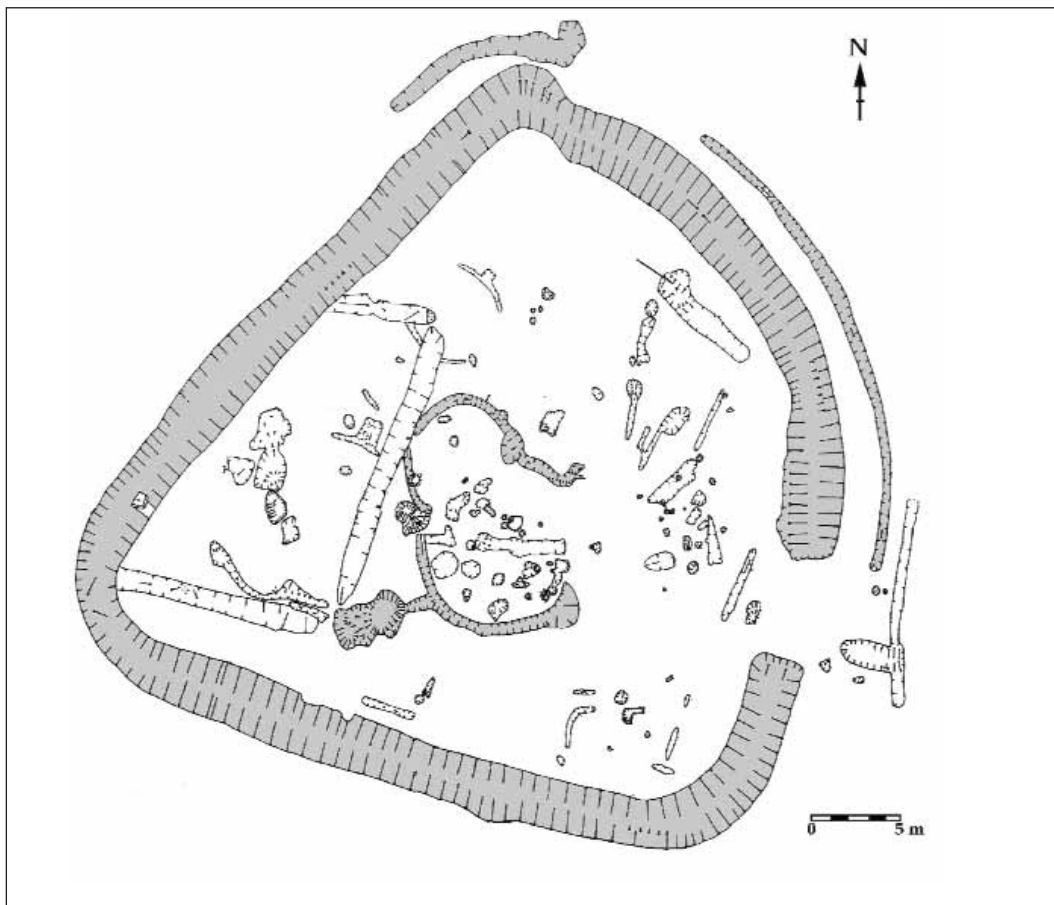
Newtown A was not visible before the pre-development ploughing programme. (The aim of the ploughing was to bring to light any traces of archaeological activity that may have been in or beneath the ploughsoil.) Originally, only the figure-of-eight structure was noted during test trenching. Topsoil stripping around the structure revealed that it was part of a larger complex and was in fact contained within a larger plectrum-shaped enclosure. (Coyne & Collins [2003] coined the term 'plectrum-shaped' in an earlier article on this site. A plectrum is used for plucking or strumming stringed instruments and is generally triangular or sub-triangular in shape.) This enclosure had a maximum width of more than 50 m, with a single, 5 m-wide causewayed entrance to the east (Illus. 3). The enclosing ditch was V-shaped in profile and averaged 3 m in width. This ditch was partly surrounded on its eastern and northern sides by a narrow trench, interpreted as an external palisade slot-trench. All features were uncovered immediately below the topsoil, with very little intercutting of features.

#### *Entrance*

The entrance consisted of a causeway formed by a 5 m-wide undug portion of the ditch and was revetted in places by stone facing. A series of post-holes and a slot-trench, uncovered immediately inside the entranceway, may all have been part of a gatehouse. Immediately inside the entrance was an area of cobbling associated with the post-holes. This layer displayed evidence of two different phases. A layer of small, angular cobbles had been partly covered by a layer of larger cobbles, which suggests an attempt at repairing or resurfacing the entrance area, probably as the surface wore away through use.

#### *Interior*

The centre of the enclosure was dominated by the figure-of-eight structure. A circular structure, 5 m in diameter, was situated NNW of this but had been severely truncated by



*Illus. 3—Plan of plectrum-shaped enclosure (Newtown A) with figure-of-eight building in interior (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)*

later drainage activity. Unfortunately, no dating evidence was recovered from this structure. The remainder of the interior contained various linear features and pits.

A series of linear features, some very shallow, were excavated in the eastern half of the interior in a sandy portion of the site. No finds or dating evidence was recovered from these features, and it is likely that some of these, on the basis of their irregular shape, may be the remains of rabbit burrows. A long, narrow, linear feature was also excavated to the north of these features, but its date or function remains unknown.

A series of drains were recorded in the western half of the interior. The largest was a north–south–running feature, probably the remains of a field drain, which produced modern pottery and glass. Various pit features were found to the west of the central structure, some substantial. They had no stratigraphic relationship with each other, however, and did not contain any datable material or artefacts, and so their precise function remains unknown. A large pit was situated to the south–west of the central structure, from which a flint blade was recovered.

#### *Figure-of-eight structure*

The most intensive evidence of activity within the enclosure was found at its centre, where the figure-of-eight-shaped building was situated. This measured 11 m internally



Illus. 4—Figure-of-eight building, from the north (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)

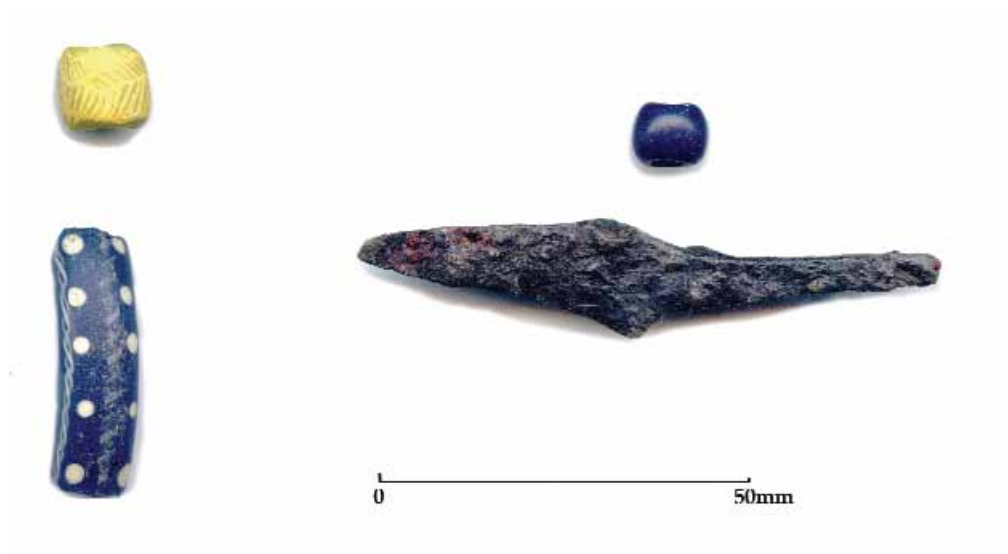
north–south by a maximum of 9 m (Illus. 3 & 4). There were a large number of pits and post-holes in the southern part of the interior of this structure, which was partly delineated by a shallow, east–west, linear trench.

The figure-of-eight building may have been a combination or amalgamation of two semicircular structures. It is similar in ground plan, although not in construction technique, to structures A–D at the early medieval ecclesiastical site at Reask, Co. Kerry, which were conjoined, circular stone huts (Fanning 1981, 91–2). Similar structures have been found at other early medieval sites. The most notable parallel is that from Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim (Mallory & McNeill 1991, 191, figs 6–12), where more than 30 houses were found (Lynn 1987), although only three or four were occupied at any one time. The houses had many of the features described in the law tracts as that of a farmer of the lowest independent grade (*ocaire*), including houses conjoined in a figure-of-eight shape (Stout 2000, 92).

A small but interesting range of artefacts was recovered (Illus. 5). A green glass bead with yellow paste herringbone decoration was recovered from the fill of the linear trench, and a shallow pit north of this trench produced a dark blue glass bead. The slot-trench for the structure produced part of a glass armlet with white decoration, an iron knife and a socketed iron implement, which was too corroded to be positively identified. The slot-trench on the northern side of the structure produced a flint scraper, some horse teeth and the top of an adult human skull (aged about 30 years but of indeterminate sex). A hone stone was also



*'Plectrum-shaped' enclosure at Newtown, County Limerick*



*Illus. 5—Glass beads, glass armlet and iron knife (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)*



*Illus. 6—Human skull fragment in the foundation trench of the figure-of-eight building, from the west (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)*

recovered from the central post-hole of the figure-of-eight building. Again, very little stratigraphic evidence was encountered, and no distinct layers of occupation were noted.

The most intriguing finds are undoubtedly the human skull fragment (Illus. 6), the flint scraper and the horse teeth. These appear to have been deposited deliberately, presumably a foundation deposit during the construction of the building. If this is the case, the occupants of this site may have retained some pagan beliefs, perhaps when the majority of people were converting to Christianity. This deposition had all the appearance of a pagan rite and, when coupled with the unusual shape of the enclosure itself, raises many intriguing questions about the exact nature of this site.

## **Dating**

Suitable samples from several features were sent for radiocarbon dating (see Appendix 1 for details). Charcoal from the slot-trench of the central building yielded a date of AD 700–1015 (Beta-182313). The central post-hole of this building produced a date of AD 795–1280 (Beta-182314), from what appears to be the remains of an oak post. The basal fill of the enclosing ditch was dated to AD 795–1030 (Beta-182317). Charcoal from an upper fill, which may date the final levelling of the site, produced a date of AD 1010–1300 (Beta-182323).

The radiocarbon determinations and the artefact assemblage suggest that the main concentration of activity on the site dates to the latter part of the first millennium, within the early medieval period. The most diagnostic finds are the two glass beads and the portion of the blue glass armlet. The most impressive of the glass beads is the green bead with herringbone decoration in yellow paste or enamel. A similar bead was found at Reask, Co. Kerry. This type of bead is of Irish manufacture and dates to the second half of the first millennium AD (Fanning 1981, 121). Blue glass beads are ubiquitous in Irish archaeology and almost impossible to date in isolation; they may date from the Bronze Age through to the early medieval period (Warner & Meighan 1994, 52).

The portion of the blue glass armlet is of the highest quality and can be paralleled with finds from elsewhere in Ireland. For example, a comparable armlet was found at the royal crannóg of Lagore, Co. Meath (Eogan 2000, 79), and another, almost identical, example from Ireland is housed in the National Museum of Denmark (Eogan 1991, 165). The Newtown armlet conforms to Carroll's (2001, 105) Class 1 bangle. She suggested that the reason for the production of luxury glass items on secular sites may have been connected with the importance of gift giving and reciprocity in early medieval Ireland, and this may explain the discovery of bangles and huge numbers of glass beads on high-status sites from the seventh to the 10th century (*ibid.*, 107).

Lagore crannóg had a period of use from the seventh to the 10th century, and the blue glass armlet presumably dates from this period. However, it is worth noting that items of value may have had a long period of use and may have been retained as treasured heirlooms. The armlet may have been in circulation for a considerable period of time until being finally lost or deposited in the ground. Geographically, the closest parallel for the Newtown armlet was found during the excavations of a cashel at Carraig Aille II, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick (*ibid.*, 113; Ó Ríordáin 1949).



*Illus. 7—Aerial photograph of Newtown A, from the west (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)*

## **Newtown E**

This site was some 25 m to the west of the plectrum-shaped enclosure (Newtown A) and took the form of what appeared to be another sub-triangular ditch (Illus. 8). No diagnostic find was recovered from the fill of this ditch, nor was any datable charcoal retrieved. The eastern side of this ditch feature was truncated by a substantial, north–south-orientated field boundary and extended to the south beyond the area affected by the road scheme. The field boundary was substantial and had its own deep ditch on its eastern side. It is likely to have obliterated the enclosure ditch and may have incorporated part of it. It was therefore impossible to ascertain its true shape through excavation. Nonetheless, it might be speculated that this possible enclosure was part of another plectrum-shaped enclosure.





*Illus. 8—Aerial photograph of Newtown E, from the north-east (Aegis Archaeology Ltd)*

### **Newtown A: what is the site?**

It would be wrong to classify this plectrum-shaped enclosure as a ringfort, as this would be to deny the enclosure's morphology. It has an entrance on its eastern side, probably to shelter it from the prevailing winds (Stout 1997, 18), and both the artefacts and the radiocarbon samples would seem to date the main activity on-site to about the 8th to the 11th century AD. The earliest dates fall within the accepted date range for the use of ringforts: from the beginning of the seventh century to the end of the ninth century (*ibid.*, 30). However, for its size, there is an almost complete absence of animal bone and general occupation evidence from the site, which implies that it may not have had a settlement function. Furthermore, despite the comparable date range, Newtown A does not fit into the present classification of ringforts. For example, Stout (2003) defines ringforts as 'the protected farmsteads of the Early Historic Period, consisting of a roughly circular space, surrounded by a bank and outer fosse, or simply by a rampart of stone. Also known as *ráth*, *dún*, *lios*, rath and fort, with stone examples called cashel (*caiseal*) or caher (*cathair*). Most ringforts are fairly circular, and it has been suggested that each new ringfort was laid out using a measuring line pivoted from a central stake (Stout 1997, 14).



If not a ringfort, then what exactly is Newtown A? The origin of ringforts is a vexed question in Irish archaeology. Did they come into use in the Iron Age, or were they an early medieval innovation (Limbert 1996; Edwards 1990, 17; O'Kelly 1951)? Indeed, it has been pointed out in various sources that the term 'ringfort' is a misnomer, and there is some degree of disagreement about their effectiveness in a defensive situation. This leads to the question of whether the term 'fort' should be applied to the monument type at all (Limbert 1996, 252).

As tens of thousands of ringforts were constructed, after the same fashion, in the space of a few hundred years, shape must have been an important consideration for the builders (Stout 1997, 24). Following on from this, can archaeologists then differentiate between ringforts and other oddly shaped enclosures? Do they have a different genesis from each other, and do they display a difference in status? Certainly the finds from Newtown seem to indicate that this site was occupied by a high-status group.

It appears that the type of enclosure represented at Newtown is present in the archaeological landscape but hidden in the archaeological record. In the absence of a clearly defined typology, they have been classified as ringforts or enclosures. The published archaeological inventories for various counties in Ireland show enclosures that are indeed plectrum-shaped, or non-circular at the very least. Aerial reconnaissance, as well as field survey, also appears to be shedding light on unusual, previously unrecorded, enclosures. Gillian Barrett's work in Counties Carlow and Kildare has highlighted several of these unusually shaped enclosures, some of which might be described as plectrum-shaped, although this term is not used (Barrett 2002). Perhaps one important reason that these sites are not commonly identified through field survey is that their banks and ditches may not have been substantial and may therefore have been easily levelled.

Two sites that have been excavated recently, although they do not appear to conform exactly to the 'plectrum shape', still have an unusual morphology: Killickaweeny, Co. Kildare (Walsh & Harrison 2003), and Balriggeran, Co. Louth (Delaney & Roycroft 2003). A third example has been discovered recently in County Clare (Hull & Taylor 2005, 38). All of these sites bear similarities to the Newtown enclosure, although they have been described initially as 'heart-shaped' elsewhere (Delaney & Walsh 2004). The artefacts recovered are generally all of high quality, which would suggest wealthy occupants, and their dating is of similar range.

## **Conclusions**

This site at Newtown A has some shared characteristics with ringforts. Central structures are found in ringforts; the positioning of the entrance is not unusual; and the artefactual and dating evidence dates the site to the early medieval period. In the absence of similar excavated sites, the discussion of the site remains somewhat in the realms of speculation. In conclusion, excavation of this site at Newtown has served to alert us to the diversity of archaeological sites that await discovery in the landscape. The discovery of a plectrum-shaped enclosure demonstrates that there must surely have been a greater variety of sites in use in the early medieval period in Ireland than has been recognised to date.

## **Acknowledgements**

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