

Archaeological testing resulted in the discovery of a prehistoric hillfort, an annex to the bivallate ringfort, a second previously unknown ringfort, and a later stone-lined cereal-drying kiln (Illus. 2). None of these monuments had been documented previously. Three human burials, one in the newly discovered ringfort ditch, one in the ringfort annex ditch and one within the annex enclosure, were also revealed.

A newly discovered hillfort

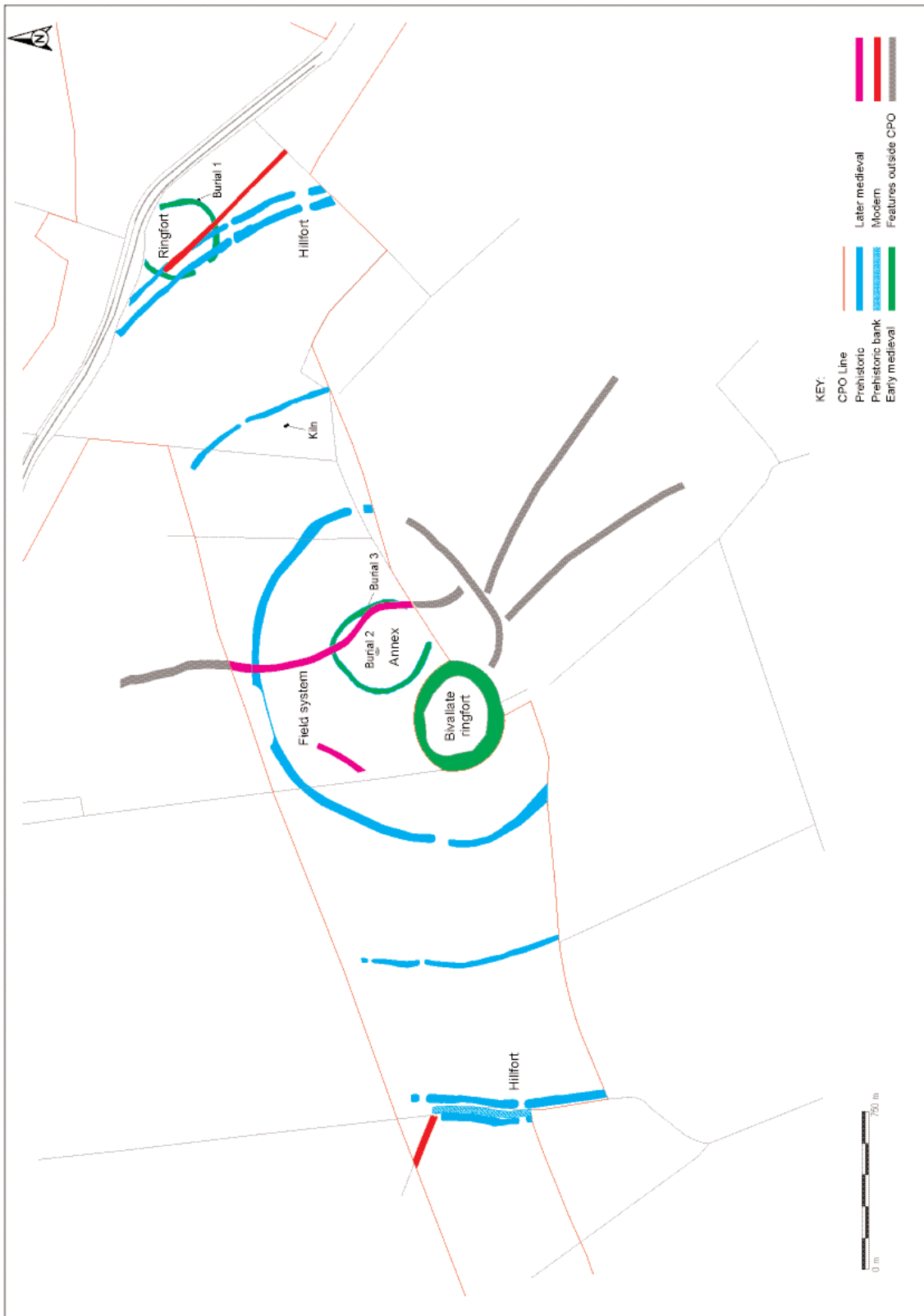
The earliest and largest archaeological monument discovered at Rahally was the hillfort. Four concentric ditches were identified, an outer double-ditch and two inner single ditches, all extending beyond the road corridor (Illus. 3 & 4). From east to west the distance between the outer double-ditches was c. 450 m. The enclosed area was 14.4 ha. Approximately 30% of the monument fell inside the area of the landtake for the road scheme and was excavated. On the western extremity of the site, the outer double-ditch was revealed at either side of an upstanding bank, currently serving as a townland boundary.

Excavations revealed the hillfort ditches to be up to 4 m in width and 1.5 m in depth, the outermost and innermost ditches being more substantial than the middle ditch. Apart from the townland boundary on the western side of the site, no upstanding evidence of the banks remained *in situ*. Evidence suggests, however, that banks had once existed, as indicated by sediment that had slumped into the ditches, particularly on the eastern side. Large stones were also present in sufficient quantities to suggest that they were the remnants of bank revetments. Only on the northern extremity of the inner ditch, at the hill base, was any variance in the enclosing features identified. Here the original excavators had not cut the usual U-shaped ditch, but had incorporated a natural wet or marshy area as a substitute.

A late La Tène metal artefact (Illus. 5) of unknown function was recovered from this wet area. Other artefacts recovered from the hillfort ditches include a damaged polished stone axehead and Late Bronze Age pottery sherds, which were in the inner ditch fills, and a damaged bone needle and whetstone from the outer double-ditches. Animal bone was also recovered from the hillfort ditches, including the full skeleton of a deer in very poor condition. A charcoal sample from this inner ditch has returned a radiocarbon date of 994–827 BC (UB-7244; see Appendix 1 for details). Charcoal samples from the outer double-ditch and the middle ditch have been radiocarbon-dated to 790–520 BC (UB-22636) and 1090–900 BC (UB-22637) respectively.

Two aligned entrances occurred in each outer ditch on the east. Corresponding entrances were found on the western side and also in the middle and inner ditches. There was no evidence of associated post-holes or other entrance features, however. Excavation of the preserved western bank revealed the greater part of it to be a relatively modern structure—part of an ‘improvement period’ field system. A post-medieval pottery sherd was recovered from the body of the bank, which stratigraphically overlay part of the upper fills of the hillfort’s double-ditch. But the remnants of an earlier bank were revealed at the base, indicating a prehistoric bank roughly aligned with the current bank. This ancient bank had evidently undergone several reconstructions and repairs during the intervening centuries.

Hillforts are defined by Grogan (2005, 111) as ‘large hilltop sites defined by substantial ramparts that take advantage of the natural defensive properties of the topography’. It is accepted that Irish hillforts originated in the latter half of the second millennium BC, and



Illus. 2—Plan of the principal features excavated at Rahally (CRDS Ltd).



Illus. 3—Mid-excavation aerial view of the site at Rahally, from south-east (Markus Casey).



Illus. 4—Aerial view of Rahally, showing the projected outline of the hillfort ditches (CRDS Ltd).



Illus. 5—Late La Tène period metal artefact, of unknown function, recovered from the marshy area at the northern extremity of the inner ditch (CRDS Ltd).

that construction of this monument type continued for several centuries at least. The number of identified Irish hillforts has increased over the last half-century or so, from estimates of 40 (Raftery 1972, 37–9) to 90 (O’Sullivan 2007, 91). Barry Raftery (1972, 39) has classified three sorts of Irish hillforts, based on the number of enclosing elements and height above sea level. The North Munster Project of the Discovery Programme has further refined their classification, based on size (Grogan 2005, 112). According to this classification, Rahally is a Class 2 hillfort, being a multivallate hilltop enclosure exceeding 5 ha. Class 2 hillforts are most common in the south and west of the country. Rahally is among the largest found to date in the Class 2 category. At 104 m above sea level it is not particularly elevated in the landscape, but it does command a wide view of the surrounding countryside, particularly to the north, east and west.

The function of the hillfort has been the subject of much discussion, but our current knowledge of Irish hillforts is based on a small number of excavations. Hillforts at Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny (Raftery 1969), Rathgall, Co. Wicklow (Raftery 1976), Haughey’s Fort, Co. Armagh (Mallory 1988), Mooghaun, Co. Clare (Grogan 1995), and Dún Aonghasa, Co. Galway (Cotter 1996), have all been at least partly excavated and are the best-known examples to date.

Grogan (2005, 121) has identified some salient research questions regarding hillforts. These include the status of hillforts as centres of permanent population or of high-status families; their periods of occupancy; and their role as ritual, industrial and military sites. There was no evidence uncovered at Rahally to suggest that the site had a permanent population during the prehistoric period. Nor was evidence found to prove that it had been the residence of a high-status family, but it could conceivably have been occupied during times of stress in prehistory. Certainly the hilltop was reoccupied in early medieval times,

and the presence of monumental prehistoric earthworks may have influenced the decision to construct the later ringforts at the site.

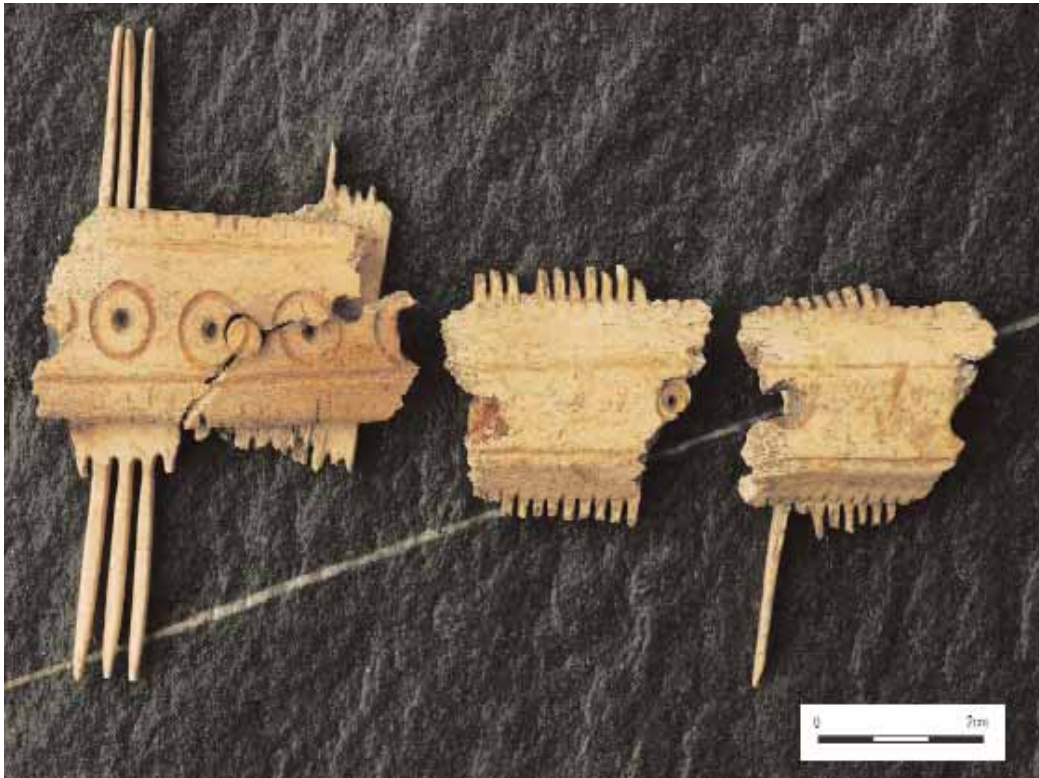
Did hillforts have a military role? Grogan (2005, 119) suggests that accessibility probably reflects the function of a hillfort. Unlike some hillforts—for instance Ballylin, Co. Limerick (LI028-085), Turlough Hill, Co. Clare (CL003-036), and Knocknashee, Co. Sligo (SL033-013)—Rahally might be described as being easily accessible. Its defences seem symbolic when compared to some British or European examples. To defend the outer circumference of Rahally would have involved a large number of people. But in keeping with a hillfort's use of the topography, wet or marshy land occurs to the north and south-east of the site. Although Rahally is relatively low-lying, it commands a view of the countryside northwards towards the *Slí Mór*, a principal ancient roadway towards the west coast, and it also overlooks the meeting-point of three baronies—Athenry, Loughrea and Kilconnell. Perhaps if the hillfort did play a military role it was symbolic, being visible from the ancient roadway and also from neighbouring chiefdoms.

In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it is easy to suggest that Grogan's remaining research question, concerning the ritual role of hillforts, provides the most likely answer as regards Rahally. The discovery of a complete deer skeleton and possible dog bone (subject to specialist confirmation) suggests the Iron Age culture of the hunt and tales of the *Fíanna*. It may also be significant that the only prehistoric metal artefact from the site was recovered from a wet context. As it is not uncommon to recover later prehistoric artefacts from watery places (Raftery 1994, 182), perhaps its deposition was associated with Iron Age ritual.

Early medieval ringforts

The newly discovered ringfort was univallate, subcircular in plan and measured 32 m in diameter. Its entrance faced south-west, towards the larger and potentially higher-status bivallate ringfort (GA086-211). A similar relationship between two ringforts was found to occur at Lisleagh, Co. Cork (Stout 1997, 19). The enclosing ditch measured up to 2 m in width and 1.25 m in depth, stratigraphically post-dating the hillfort's outer double-ditches. A charcoal sample from a secondary ditch fill has been radiocarbon-dated to AD 680–890 (UB-22638). Much of the ringfort interior and the eastern ditch segment had been truncated in the past by land improvements, which had destroyed any occupation layer. An interior curvilinear gully was partly preserved; its location suggests that it served to drain water from an internal bank. Some similarly located gullies were excavated at Dressogagh Rath, Co. Armagh (Collins 1966, 127–8). Four internal pits, likely to be associated with the ringfort's period of occupancy, were also identified. The ditches produced some interesting finds, including large amounts of cut bone and antler, two metal blades and decorated bone comb fragments (Illus. 6). These finds suggest industrial activities. A blue glass bead and a base-metal finger-ring, which is likely to pre-date AD 600 (M Jones, pers. comm.), were also found in the ditch. A human burial was recovered from the eastern ditch base.

Archaeologists agree that ringforts represent farmsteads (McCormick 1995, 33). Stout (1997, 53) states that there are over 45,000 mapped examples, of which 41% have been 'positively identified'. But the original number may have been greater. Many destroyed monuments are being recognised during the course of pre-development archaeological survey or testing, as has happened at Rahally. Ringforts are often locally known by their



Illus. 6—Decorated bone comb fragments recovered from the ditch of the newly discovered univallate ringfort (CRDS Ltd).

Gaelic name, *lios* or *rath*, a term sometimes incorporated into the townland name. Stout (ibid., 81–2), in his study of the national distribution of ringforts, has noted that south-east Connacht is a high-density area. Rahally is close to a notable concentration of ringforts between the towns of Ballinasloe and Loughrea. Interior dimensions vary regionally and examples are recorded between 15.5 m and 75 m, but 84% of known sites measure between 20 m and 44 m in diameter. Univallate ringforts, those with one ditch and bank, are by far the most common type. Multivallate ringforts, those with two or, more rarely, three banks, account for approximately 19% of the national total, although 33% of the 1,104 ringforts recorded in the published archaeological inventory for north Galway are bivallate (Alcock et al. 1999).

Another type of enclosure representing the early medieval period at Rahally was an annex, located immediately east of the bivallate ringfort on the hill summit. It was subcircular in plan and measured c. 38 m by 40 m (Illus. 7). The enclosing ditch was V-shaped in section, unlike the hillfort ditches, and was up to 3 m wide and up to 1.2 m deep. A charcoal sample from a secondary fill of this ditch returned a radiocarbon date of AD 1020–1180 (UB-22641). No stratigraphic relationship existed between the annex and the ringfort, but as the hilltop had previously been the centre of the hillfort, it is not surprising that a linear cutting enclosed by the annex ditch has been radiocarbon-dated to the Iron Age (380–180 BC, UB-22642). A burnt pit east of the enclosure returned a radiocarbon date of 200–40 BC (UB-22643). The southern part of the annex ditch extended beyond the road corridor, but a terminus was located just inside the boundary, perhaps indicating



Illus. 7—Annex to the bivallate ringfort, looking south-west (CRDS Ltd).



Illus. 8—Penannular brooch from the ditch of the bivallate ringfort annex (CRDS Ltd).

an entrance. Most archaeological features within the annex were concentrated on the southern side. Features included a complex series of linear cuttings, a metallised surface, a dumbbell kiln, pits and a series of post-holes forming a semicircle. Although many of these features may be contemporary with earlier medieval use of the annex, it is evident from the radiocarbon dating results that activity continued in the area for at least a number of centuries following the infilling of the enclosing ditch. A charcoal sample from the basal fill of the kiln returned a date of AD 1215–1285 (UB-22646), and a sample from a post-hole returned a date of AD 1440–1640 (UB-22645). A juvenile human burial was found in the northern side of the annex.

Some evidence for an internal bank was found on the eastern and western interiors of the annex ditch. In common with other features at Rahally, there were few finds, but those recovered were of good quality and datable. They include an iron arrowhead from the subsoil, a copper-alloy penannular brooch (Illus. 8) and a coloured glass bead, both from the

upper ditch fill, and some worked animal bone from an internal gully fill. A substantial amount of animal bone recovered from the ditch fills is awaiting specialist analysis. In common with the ditch fills of the newly discovered ringfort on the eastern extremity of the site, an incomplete human skeleton was found in the annex ditch.

Many ringforts preserve evidence for domestic dwellings. Those in which there is no occupation evidence are said to have functioned as cattle enclosures (Stout 1997, 33). Because the annex is located immediately east of the bivallate ringfort, it is likely that both monuments are associated. The bivallate ringfort stands immediately outside the landtake for the road and was not excavated, but the outlines of two potential rectangular structures are visible within the interior. These might represent dwellings, leaving the annex as an enclosed farmyard. The pattern of linear features, perhaps gullies and wall footings, within the annex may represent animal pens or structures for sheep, pigs or calves, or young dairy cows. The absence of post-holes within the wall footings is not unusual in rectangular structures (Lynn 1994, 86). Fergus Kelly (1998, 363–5) has indicated that there is ample evidence for the penning and housing of domestic animals in the early medieval Irish texts. A metallised surface, some small post-holes, slot-trenches and pits might represent a working area. Some linear features within the annex were interpreted as gullies, based on their sloping towards the annex ditch. As with many contemporary enclosures (Waterman 1972, 31), the interior slope is often away from the cold winds—in this case towards the south.

Later medieval field system

One of the benefits resulting from the Rahally excavations was the dating of the previously recorded field system banks. A charcoal sample from beneath the central bank returned a radiocarbon date of AD 1043–1218 (UB-7245). It was also stratigraphically established that the central field system bank post-dated the filling of the ringfort annex ditch. Therefore the annex had fallen into disuse by the 12th or 13th century AD. Approximately 90 m of the central bank and 15 m of a second western bank were located within the road corridor. The preserved remnants of both were c. 2 m wide and up to 0.6 m high prior to excavation (Illus. 9). No associated artefacts were recovered.



Illus. 9—Remnants of the central field system bank, looking south (CRDS Ltd).



Illus. 10—Stone-lined cereal-drying kiln (CRDS Ltd).

Early modern cereal-drying kiln

In the final period represented at Rahally, a stone-lined, keyhole-type, cereal-drying kiln was excavated inside the middle hillfort ditch on the eastern side of the site (Illus. 10). It was constructed of rough field stones and cut into the south-facing slope of a natural hollow. The kiln, including the flue, measured 1.35 m in width, 2.15 m in length and was 0.8 m deep. It was aligned north–south. Although no evidence of a fire-pit was found, charred material and heat-affected stone were identified. The top of the kiln bowl was level with the ground on the northern side. Gaps within the stone structure of the bowl could have been used to support mats. There was no evidence for collapsed roofing; perhaps a removable thatched roof had been used.

A roughly cobbled area immediately south of the kiln is likely to represent a convenient working area. There is ample evidence for such spaces in the vicinity of kilns (Monk & Kelleher 2005, 84). A worn, Irish issue, George II halfpenny from the 1740s was recovered from the cobbles, indicating that the area was still open, but not necessarily in use, during the second half of the 18th century.

Conclusion

This paper briefly describes a large excavation spanning 3,000 years of human activity at Rahally, beginning in the Late Bronze Age and continuing down to the modern era. It is not known what time elapsed, if any, between the cessation of hillfort use and construction of the ringforts. Later field system banks and, later again, a kiln all testify to continued agricultural practice in the area following the abandonment of the ringforts. It is probable that the excavations at Rahally will be best remembered for the hillfort. But the hillfort is only part of this complex archaeological landscape in east Galway. Only when the final results and specialists' reports from all the excavations that were carried out along the route

of the proposed N6 are analysed will the significance of our excavations at Rahally be better understood.

Acknowledgements

A large number of people were involved with the excavation of Rahally, both on and off the site. Thanks are due to them all, but Martin McGonigle and Denis Shine deserve a special mention. CRDS Ltd provided excellent support throughout the excavations.

Note

1. NGR 166007 225872; height 104 m OD; excavation reg. no. E2006; ministerial direction nos A024/008 & A041.

