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.

Aerial view of Balgatheran Lake and the completed motorway. (Photo StudioLab)
The evidence for Bronze Age occupation on the southern side of the river comes from two Late Bronze Age roundhouses and a Late Iron Age roundhouse was probably built around 100 – 50 BC. This house had internal palisades backed by bank material in the centre of all the excavated buildings. The first had a 1.5 m wide ditch defining a roundhouse 9.5 m wide internally containing a central hearth. The second was a partial circular enclosure 11 m wide internally containing two circular ditches. The third was a complete enclosure 12 m wide internally containing three circular ditches. The size of these roundhouses varied from 10m to 20m, and some had internal palisades backed by bank material. The earliest buildings were built with a slot trench containing posts and vertical timbers. There was a large pit building at Rathmullen, Co. Down, which was covered with a Late Bronze Age enclosure.

Bronze age buildings and burials

Hill of Rath was an annexe of Rathmullen, and Rathmullen appears to have been a Late Iron Age roundhouse. The oval-circular buildings (Rathmullen was 13.5 m diameter) had an external drip gully and a porch-hall with four concentric rings of posts. It was 11.58 m in diameter, had an external drip gully and a porch-hall with four concentric rings of posts. It was 11.58 m in diameter, had an external drip gully and a porch-hall with four concentric rings of posts. It was 11.58 m in diameter, had an external drip gully and a porch-hall with four concentric rings of posts. At Sheephouse, Kilsharvan and Lagavooren, the circular enclosures were post-hole buildings 8 m – 10 m across, often with ditch-gates. Flexible ring-barrow and annexe burials were found at Sheephouse and Lagavooren.

Late Iron Age roundhouse and ring-cairn

The unusual site discovered at Balgatheran, Co. Meath, appears to show a unified rectilinear field system and a series of souterrains, each incorporating a constriction and a drain and ending in a large and formal driveway. The ditches seem to have been used to contain water, which may have been diverted from the river Boyne next to a roadway.

Late medieval

ecclesiastical estate, burials and buildings

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Underneath a tree planted on a clearance cairn in County Meath a Late Iron Age ring-cairn was discovered at Claristown. During excavation, the site came to the notice of a farmer from a field, and a circular layer of stones was laid across, often with ditch-gates. The unusual site discovered at Balgatheran, Co. Meath, appears to show a unified rectilinear field system and a series of souterrains, each incorporating a constriction and a drain and ending in a large and formal driveway. The ditches seem to have been used to contain water, which may have been diverted from the river Boyne next to a roadway.

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