

**Archaeological Excavation of
a *fulacht fiadh* at
Site 133, Newtownbalregan 7,
Dundalk, Co. Louth
M1-Dundalk Western Bypass**

Excavation Licence Number: 04E0817

NGR: 302030/308495

Chainage: 20910

ÆGIS Ref: 255-1.8



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PROJECT ARCHAEOLOGIST:	Niall Roycroft

PLEASE NOTE...

That the archaeological recommendations, mitigation proposals and suggested methodology followed in this report were first formulated and approved by the National Roads Authority Project Archaeologist Niall Roycroft, prior to the commencement of the archaeological dimension of the project.

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I. Abstract

This report details the licenced archaeological excavation of features discovered during the monitoring of topsoil stripping (licence 04E0335) associated with the construction of the Dundalk Western Bypass Dundalk, Co. Louth. The features were uncovered in the townland of Newtownbalregan located to the south of the N53 road linking Dundalk to Castleblaney. Full site details include:

- Project Site No: Site 133, Newtownbalregan 7
- NGR: 302030/308495
- Chainage: 20910

A spread of burnt material, identified as a *fulacht fiadh* was noted during topsoil stripping. No trace of it was visible above ground and it is probable that it had been levelled by agricultural activity in the past. The site was excavated from 19-4-04 to 23-4-04.

The archaeological dimension of this project was funded in full by the client.

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III. Abbreviations Used in Text

Bank Right bank and left bank of a river or stream may be determined when one looks downstream, i.e. in the direction that the river is flowing. It may also be an earthen 'wall' around an enclosure, often associated with a ditch.

Barony, Parish, Townland These terms refer to land divisions in Ireland. The barony is the largest land division in a county, which is formed from a number of parishes. These parishes are in turn made up of several townlands, which are the smallest land division in the country. The origins of these divisions are believed to be in the Early Medieval/Christian period (AD500-AD1000), or may date earlier in the Iron Age (500BC-AD500).

Context Each feature found during the excavations is allocated a number, commonly termed a 'Context Number' in order to record the archaeology.

Ditch A cut feature forming an enclosure and associated with a bank in some cases.

First Edition This relates to editions of the OS 6 inch maps for each county. The first edition map completed for the area dates to the early 1840s and this is referred to in the text as the "first edition".

G.S. Grid square

LH - This number is the number of the site on the RMP map (see below). It begins with the county code, here LH for Louth, the 6-inch sheet number, followed by the number of the archaeological site.

M Metres, all dimensions are given in metres or part of a metre, unless otherwise stated

OS Ordnance Survey

Ph Parish

RMP Record of Monuments and Places. An update of the older SMR, (sites and monuments record), on which all known archaeological sites are marked and listed in an accompanying inventory. The sites marked afford legal protection under the National Monuments Acts 1930-1994. The record is based on the 6 inch map series for the country and is recorded on a county basis.

Sheet This relates to the six inch map for each county which is divided into sheets.

Td Townland

1. Introduction

1.1 Background to Excavation

The site at Newtownbalregan was noted during monitoring of the topsoil stripping phase of the project in advance of the Dundalk Western Bypass, under licence: 04E0335. The *fulacht fiadh* at Newtownbalregan was identified during this monitoring. There was no trace of the feature above ground. The site was excavated in April 2004.

The entire length of the route was subject to an Archaeological Impact Assessment in 1993 and 2000. A programme of centre-line testing was subsequently undertaken in 2002 by Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd (licence Nos. 02E0373 & 02E0658) and archaeological sites encountered during the testing were excavated prior to the topsoil stripping phase of the project.

1.2 Location and Existing Environment (figures 1 & 2)

The site is located to the northwest of Dundalk town in the townland of Newtownbalregan, some 300m to the south of the N53 road to Castleblaney (NGR 302030/308495). The townland of Newtownbalregan is situated in the parish of Castletown and the barony of Dundalk Lower.

The site was located approximately 60m to the south of a stream running from east to west across the road take (AOD 25.70m). The ground rose steadily to the south while it remained quite level to the north where it dropped to the Castleblaney road.

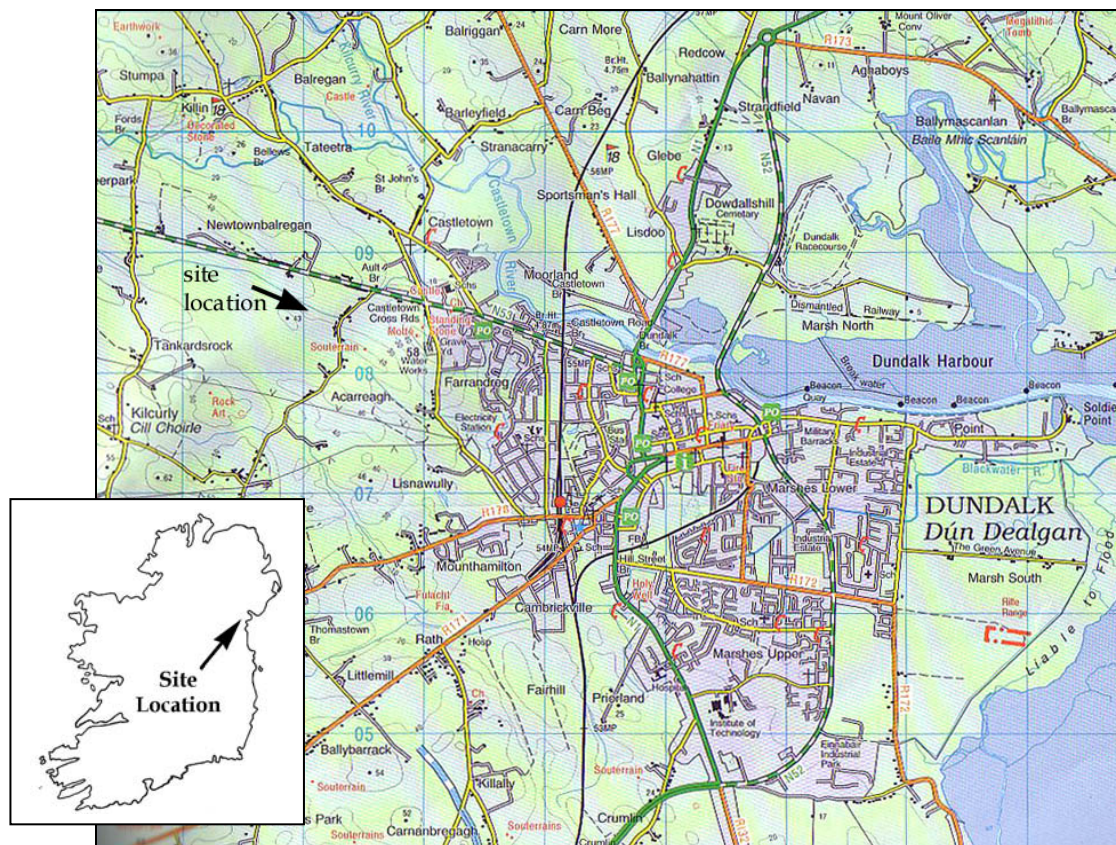


Figure 1. General location map of site, north to top (after Discovery Series 36, 1box = 1km²)

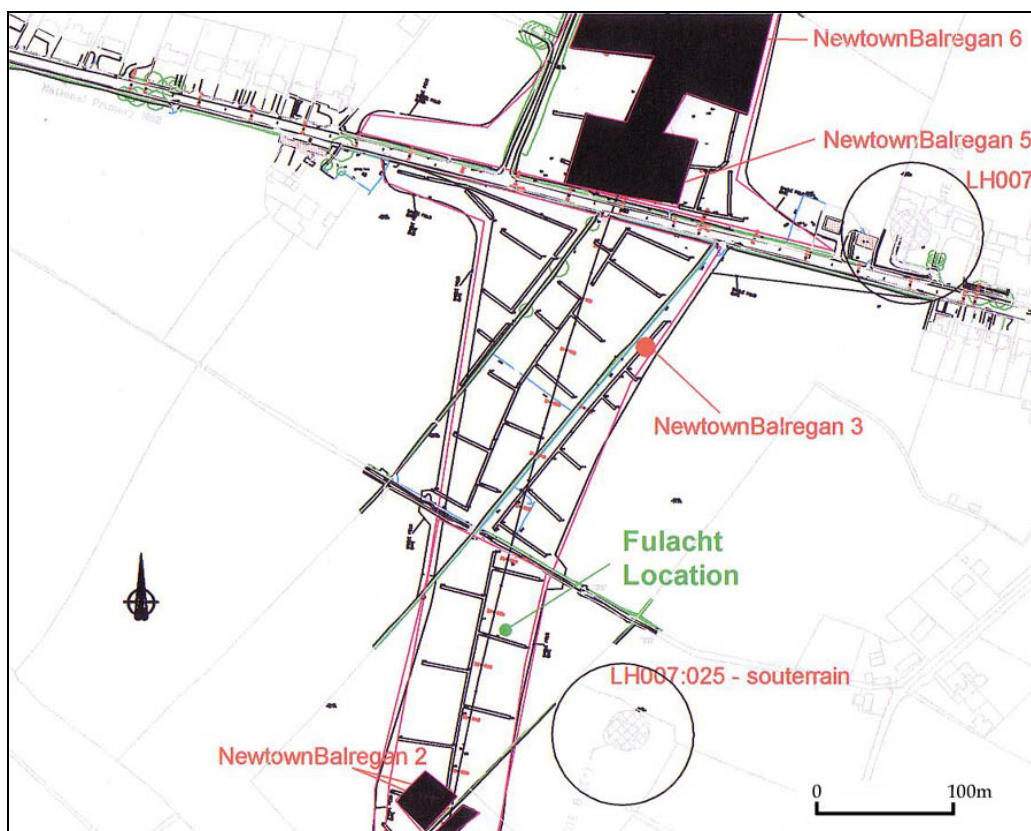


Figure 2. Location of site (in green) in relation to Dundalk Western Bypass (supplied by NRA Project Archaeologist, with additions)

rock art featuring two cup and ring motifs. One of these has radial grooves while there is a curving line on the rock outcrop adjacent to the other.

To the east of the site, in the townland of Castletown lies the site of *Dún Dealgan* (LH007-118--). This is an impressive example of a motte and bailey. The circular mound has a maximum height of 6m and a maximum diameter of 68m at the base. An exterior D-shaped bailey enclosed by an earthen bank adjoins the fosse at the northwest. A much larger, subrectangular bailey, adjoining the bank at the southeast has been replaced by modern waterworks.

The entire route of the Dundalk Western Bypass was also subject to a phase of centre line test trenching. Numerous archaeological sites were identified and excavated as a result of this. The site of Newtownbalregan 2 (as shown on figure 2) lay approximately 150m to the south of the *fulacht fiadh*. Fragments of a large, decorated prehistoric pot were found here in a shallow pit. Newtownbalregan 3 lay approximately 250m to the north of the *fulacht fiadh*. On the northern side of the Castleblaney road was the site of Newtownbalregan 5. This was a settlement site, probably dating to the Bronze Age consisting of a hut and associated features (including a spread of *fulacht* material). Numerous flint flakes and sherds of prehistoric pottery were recovered from this site. Newtownbalregan 6 was also located in the vicinity, to the north of the Castleblaney Rd. It consisted of a large single ditched ringfort 45m in diameter and an associated 45m long souterrain (Bayley & Roycroft 2003).

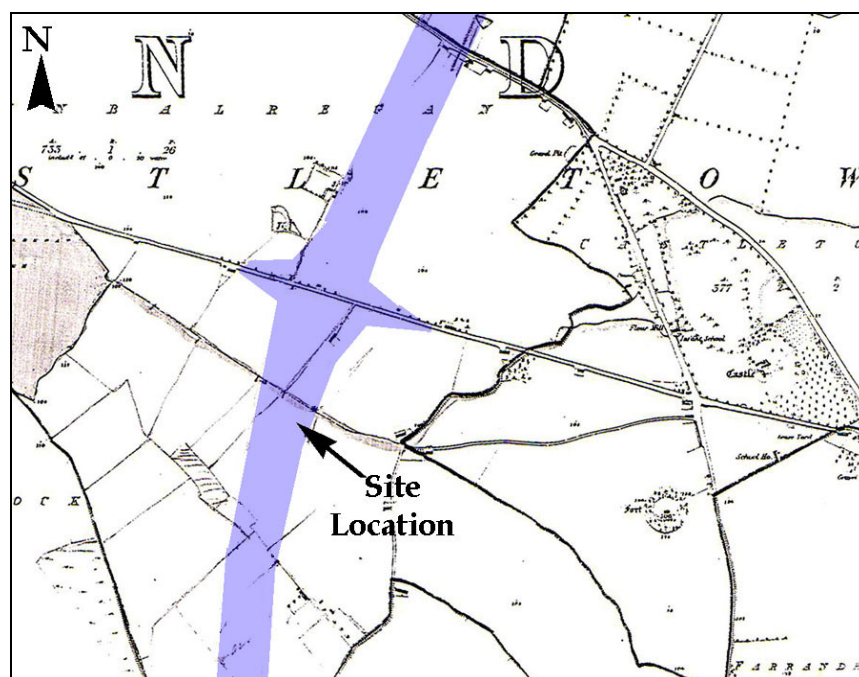


Figure 4. 1st edition 6-inch map showing site location, proposed road in blue (OS 1835)

The townland of Newtownbalregan is located in the parish of Castletown and the Barony of Lower Dundalk. Newtownbalregan or *Baile Nua Dealgan* located in the parish of *Caislean Dhun Dealgan* (O'Donovan 1840) linking the area to the nearby site of Dun Dealgan, visible from the excavation site to the west.

1.4 Excavation Methodology

The excavation of the site at Newtownbalregan was run in compliance with the agreed method statement submitted with the excavation licence for this project. The topsoil covering the site was stripped by a mechanical excavator working under archaeological supervision. The site at Newtownbalregan was completely excavated by hand. The excavation took place over a period of one week in April 2004. The team consisted of one director, one supervisor and four assistants.

The resolution of the project is being undertaken in accordance with guidelines as set out by the heritage policy paper *Policy & Guidelines for Archaeological Excavation* (DAHGI 1999). The project also draws on English Heritage's policy document *Management of Archaeological Projects* (1991), which includes the following project pathway:

- Phase 1 Project Plan
- Phase 2 Fieldwork (on-site resolution)
- Phase 3 Assessment of Potential for Analysis
- Phase 4 Analysis and Report Production
- Phase 5 Dissemination

Phase Two- the site excavation, by hand, of the site, used an amended version of the MoLAS (Museum of London Archaeological Service 1994) system of context recording. This is a method of excavation that has been used in Britain since the 1970s and has proved to be very successful, in both the efficiency of on-site recording/excavating and in the formation of the report in post-excavation.

Aegis has its own Quality Manual (2001 and revisions) which sets out all its Standard Operating Procedures (SOPS) for work of this type. These are followed as part of the company's wider Quality Management System.

This report represents phase 4 of the project pathway.

2. Context List

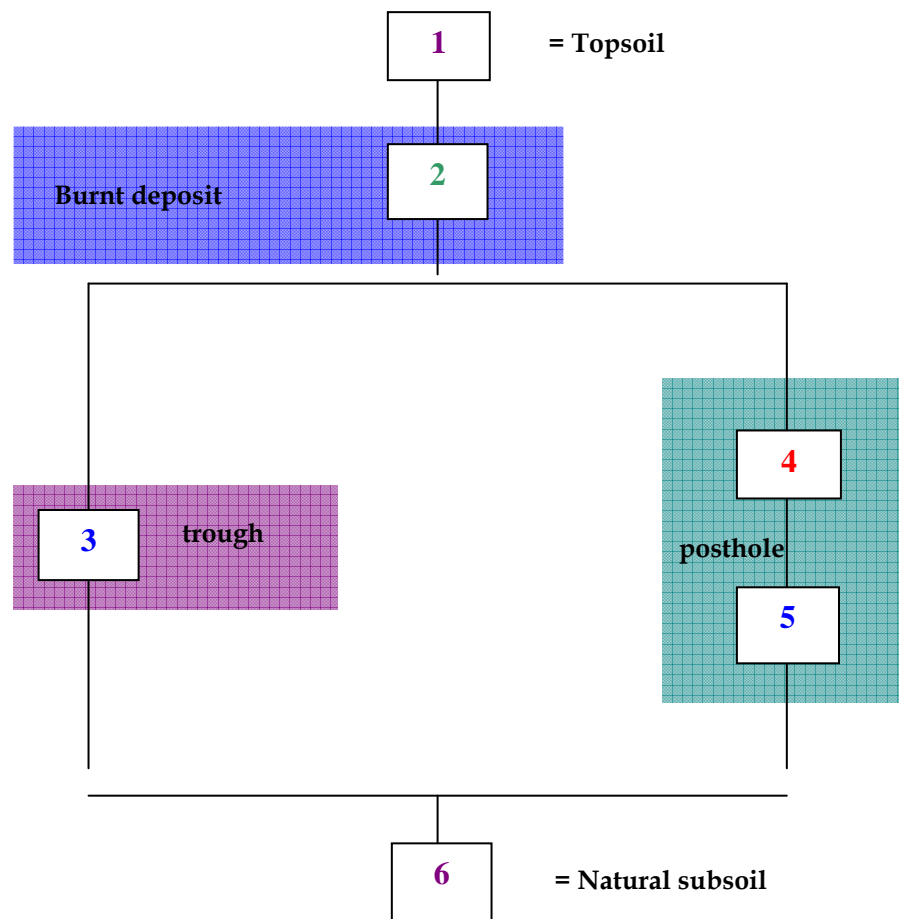
Context Number	Grid Square	Description
1	All	Topsoil
2	All	<i>Fulacht fiadh</i> deposit/burnt mound material
3	105/100	Cut of possible trough filled by [c2]
4	105/100	Fill of possible posthole [c5]
5	105/100	Cut of possible posthole containing [c4]
6	All	Natural parent material

3. Stratigraphic Sequence

3.1 Matrix

The first stage of report compilation is the formation of the site matrix. This structure collates all the contexts that have been excavated and recorded, and preserves their stratigraphic relationships in flow chart fashion. The entire interpretation of the site rests on this visual manifestation of the archaeology as excavated. The contexts of the matrix are then grouped and segmented to create features and phases, all of which are described in detail below (section 3.2 Context Descriptions and section 4 Interpretation of Stratigraphy).

Newtownbalregan Matrix: 04E0817



Key to Matrix

Red:	Fill
Blue:	Cut
Green	Deposit
Purple:	Layer

3.2 Context Descriptions

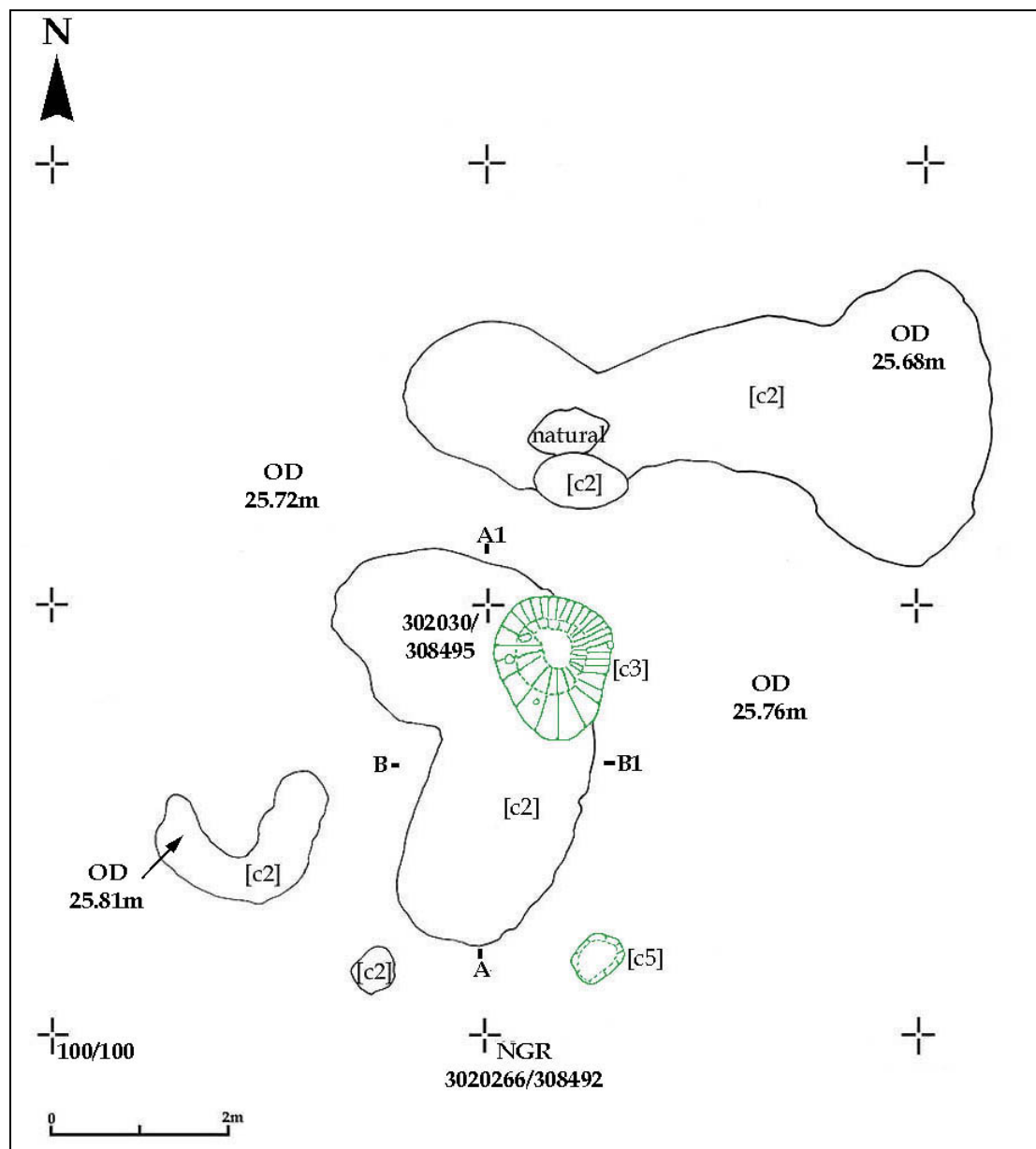


Figure 5. Plan of site with earlier trough [c3] and circular feature [c5]

Note: Features below referred to by their cut numbers

Context 2

Context type: Burnt Mound Material: Deposit (figures 5 & 6, plates 1-4)

This deposit consisted of a loose dark greyish black silty sand, which contained frequent fragments of burnt stone. It was spread in patches over an area approximately 7m from north to south by 7m from east to west. It had a maximum depth of 0.40m but in most areas it was quite shallow. It appears that the site had been heavily truncated by agricultural activity and

by bulldozers during topsoil stripping. There were no finds or samples recovered from the deposit.

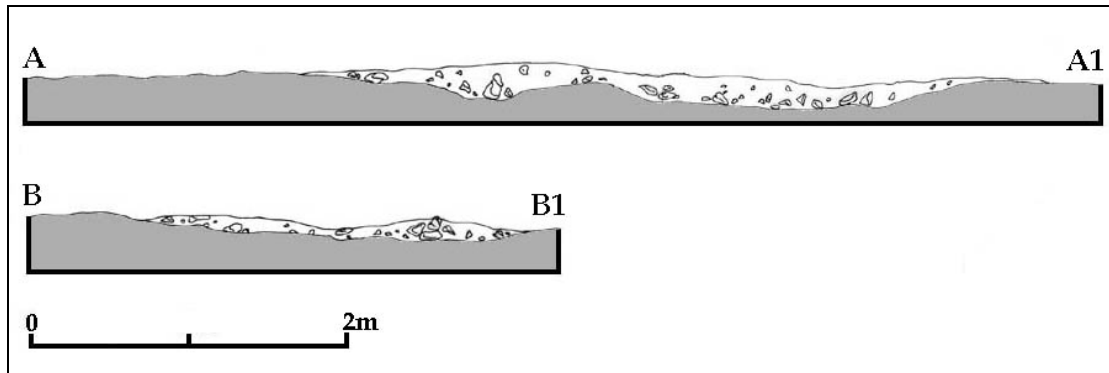


Figure 6. Sections through [c2] burnt material

Context 3

Context type: Trough cut (figures 7 & 8, plates 5 & 6)

This was a sub-circular pit approximately 1.69m in length from north to south and 1.40m wide from east to west. It was approximately 0.32m deep with a gradual break of slope at the top and at the base. The sides were concave and the base was rounded. It was filled by [c2]. This pit was located approximately at the centre of the spread of burnt material and it seems to represent the trough of the *fulacht fiadh*.

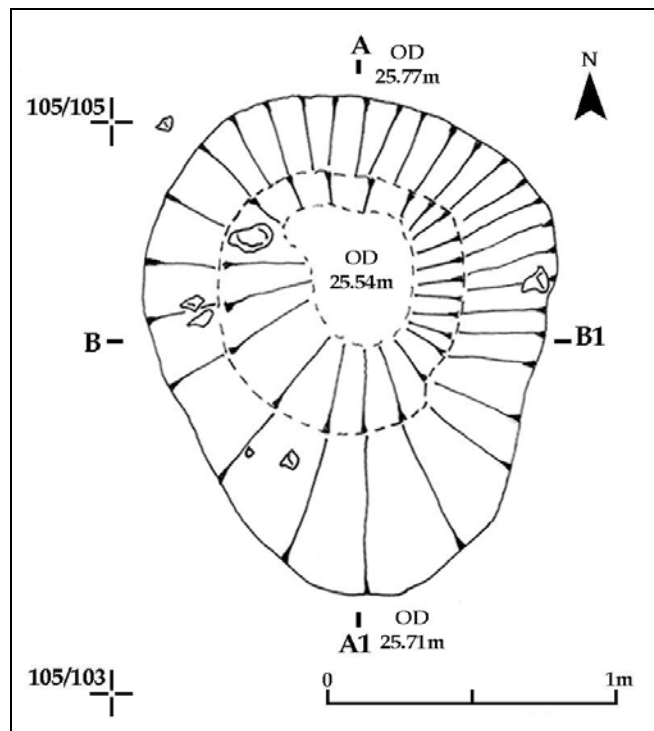


Figure 7. Plan of trough cut [c3]

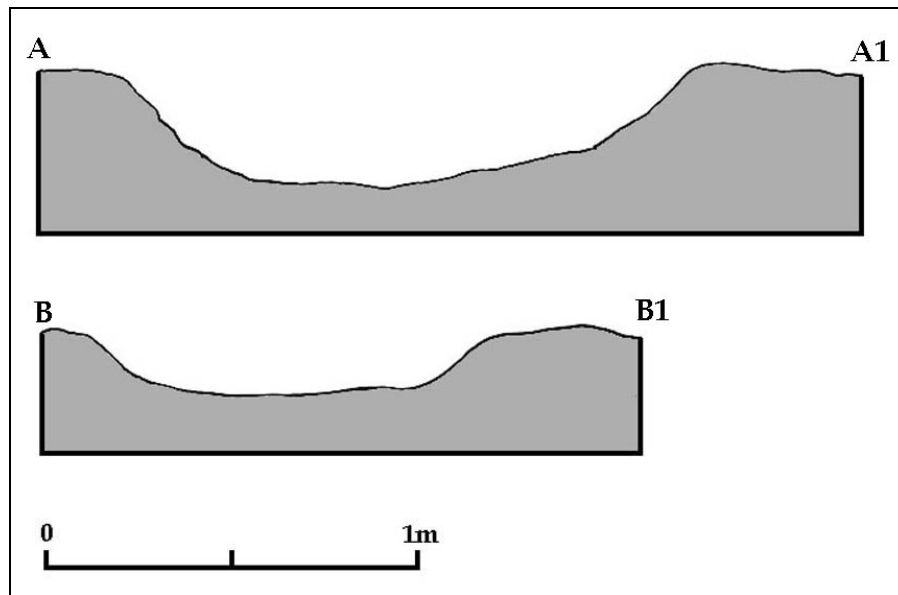


Figure 8. Sections through trough cut [c3]

Context 5 (figures 9 & 10, plates 7 & 8)

Context type: Possible posthole

This oval shaped feature was 0.60m in length from east to west and 0.42m wide from north to south. It was 0.30m deep with a sharp break of slope at the top and at the base. It had vertical sides and a flat base. It was filled by [c4], a loose black sandy silt which contained occasional large stones and fragments of decayed stone.

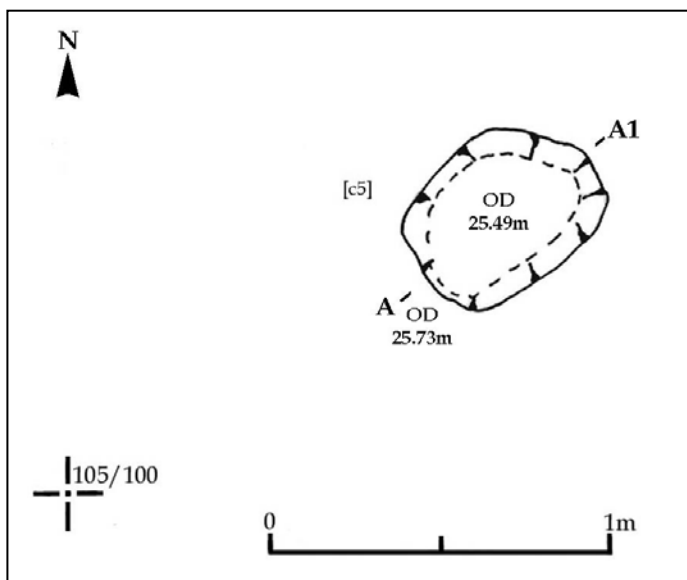


Figure 9. Post ex plan of [c5]

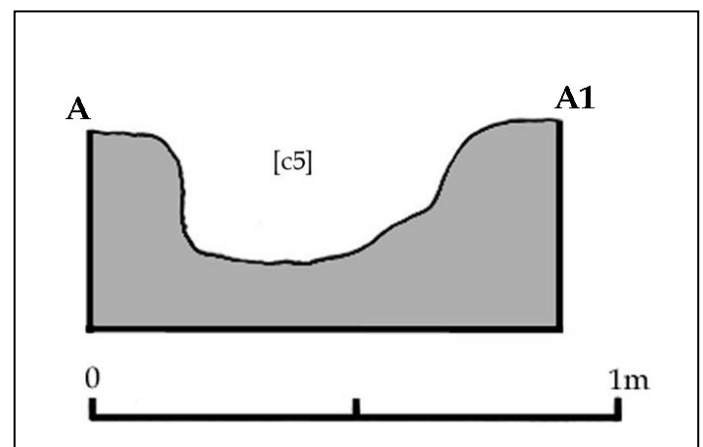


Figure 10. Section through [c5]

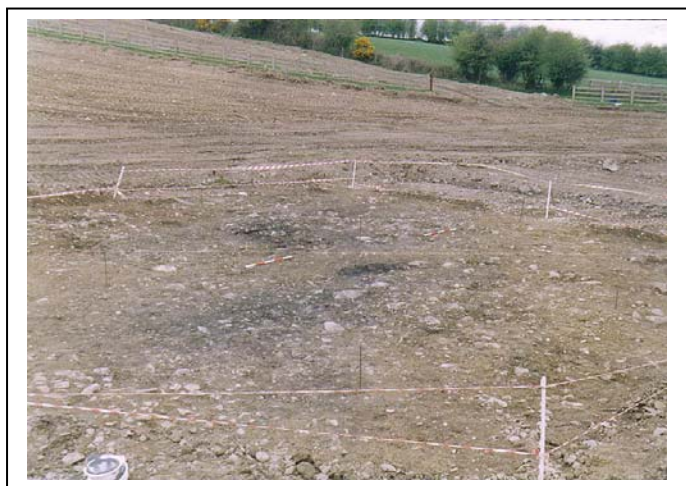


Plate 1. Pre excavation view of site from northeast



Plate 2. Pre excavation view of site from south



Plate 3. [c2] section A from east



Plate 4. [c2] section B from east



Plate 5. [c3] post excavation from north



Plate 6. [c3] post excavation from west



Plate 7. [c4] partially excavated from northeast



Plate 8. [c5] post excavation from east



Plate 9. Site from northeast after excavation

4. Interpretation of Stratigraphy

The burnt mound deposit [c2] was overlain by a thin layer of topsoil [c1]. On removal of [c2] two features [c3] and [c5] were cut into the underlying subsoil [c6]. The site appears to be the truncated remains of a *fulacht fiadh* or burnt mound.

The spread of *fulacht* material, [c2], was scattered quite thinly in patches across the site. The use of bulldozers during topsoil stripping would have truncated it slightly, but it is likely that it had also been levelled through agricultural activity in the past. This would contribute to the lack of a definite horseshoe morphology typically associated with well-preserved *fulachta fiadh*.

The *fulacht* material covered two cut features, [c3] and [c5]. Cut [c3] was probably the trough area of the *fulacht fiadh*. No timbers were recovered from the feature but soil disturbance and poor preservation conditions may have contributed to this. The cut was quite shallow and was filled with *fulacht* material. The second cut, [c5], was filled by [c4] which was in turn covered by [c2]. This may have been a posthole or shallow pit associated with the *fulacht fiadh*. As no other postholes were found in the vicinity it is probable that it was not structural. There was no evidence of *in situ* burning around the cut of the feature, ruling out its possible function as a fire where stones were heated.

No charcoal, cremated bone, wood or other organic material was recovered from the excavation so it will not be possible to obtain a radiocarbon date for the site. *Fulachta fiadh* are typically identified with the Bronze Age period in Ireland, but earlier and later examples have been found (as discussed in Section 5, below). The settlement site of Newtownbalregan 5 is in close proximity and appears to date to the Bronze Age (N. Roycroft perscomm.). Given the absence of potential for a radiocarbon date and the lack of diagnostic artefacts, it might be supposed, based on comparison with similar sites that this *fulacht fiadh* dates loosely to the Bronze Age.

5. Discussion

The site at Newtownbalregan appears to be a *fulacht fiadh*, one of the most common monument type in Ireland. These sites are often interpreted as cooking places, and when apparent in the landscape can take the form of low, grass-covered mounds, which may be horseshoe, crescent, oval or kidney shaped (O’Kelly 1989; Waddell 1998). The name *fulacht* or *fulachta fian* is found in early Irish literature, referring to the cooking places of the warriors of The Fianna. The mounds are generally composed of a heap of fire-shattered stones with ash and charcoal, giving it a blackened appearance. They often have a depression to one side, which upon excavation reveals itself to be a trough area.

This trough would have functioned as a water receptacle, which can be lined with timber or stone or simply excavated into the natural clay. The *fulacht fiadh* at Newtownbalregan had an associated trough with no evidence of timber or stone lining.

The trough would have been filled with water and heated stones placed into it, in order to raise the water temperature to boiling point for cooking. The stones shattered during this process would have been removed and piled next to the trough. A repeated process of this activity would eventually form a mound, known as *fulacht fiadh*. As water was an important element in this process, burnt mounds are frequently found near a water source, or in wet marshy areas where the trough may have filled naturally with water. The site at Newtownbalregan was located in wet low-lying ground close to a stream.

The functions of burnt mounds are widely debated and their use solely as cooking places has been challenged (Barfield and Hodder 1987). Other suggested functions include brewing, saunas/sweat houses and curing of hides. No traces of animal bone were recovered from the site at Newtownbalregan so use as a cooking area cannot be definitely assigned.

Fulachta fiadh area also known to sometimes occur in groups (Wadell 1998, 174). Eighteen burnt mounds were excavated along an 800m stretch in advance of the construction of the N11 in Co. Wickow (McLoughlin 2001). Brindley and Lanting (1990, 32) state that large concentrations of *fulachta fiadh* suggest permanent settlements of groups of people rather than isolated family units. This theory is sometimes borne out by the evidence of nearby settlement, such as the settlement at Newtown A, Co. Limerick (Coyne 2001b) and its proximity to two *fulachta fiadh* (Hayes 2001 and Connolly 2001). There was evidence for settlement at Newtownbalregan 5 and it is possible that the addition of a *fulacht fiadh* may point to a wider pattern of settlement in the area.

No samples of charcoal or other organic material were retrieved from this site making it impossible to obtain a radiocarbon date for the site. A number of *fulacht fiadh* in Killula and Knockaun, County Clare yielded late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age dates during excavations along the N18/19 road improvement scheme (Murphy in Bennett 2003). Equally a *fulacht fiadh* complex in Claristown, Co. Meath yielded Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age dates (Russell in Bennett 2003).

Analyses of radiocarbon dates from *fulachta fiadh* in 1990 indicated that they generally dated to the Bronze Age (Brindley & Lanting 1990, 56) yet this analysis was qualified to be relevant only to sites with troughs and mounds of burnt stone. Charcoal and wood samples recovered from troughs at Newtown and Peafield, Co. Limerick were dated to the Early Bronze Age (Beta Analytic Reference 182306/182307/182309 in Hayes 2001, Collins 2001). In a sample of sites from Scotland, sites from the Northern and Arran Isles dated from the Early Iron Age and Early Bronze age respectively. In the East Rhins, most of the sampled mounds on the east side of the Water of Luce, yielded Bronze Age dates. However, on the western side of the Water of Luce two mounds produced dates from the eleventh and twelfth centuries AD (Russell-White 1990, 91). Irish examples from later periods include a medieval cooking trough from Waterford City (Walsh in Buckley 1990).

No diagnostic artefacts were recovered at Newtownbalregan 7. Burnt mounds are now the most recorded field monuments in the country, and quite a few have been excavated in recent years.

6. Sample & Find List

No samples or finds were recovered from the excavation at Newtownbalregan 7.

7. Conclusions

The excavation of features discovered during the archaeological monitoring of topsoil stripping associated with the construction of the Dundalk Western Bypass at Newtownbalregan, Dundalk, Co. Louth was undertaken in April 2004. There were no above ground indications prior to topsoil stripping.

The site consisted primarily of a patchy spread of burnt stone set in a burnt silty sand matrix. This was identified as the site of a levelled *fulacht fiadh*. Excavation of this material revealed a trough area typical of this site type. A possible posthole or pit feature was also found beneath the burnt material, but the nature of this feature cannot be clearly determined in relation to the *fulacht fiadh*. No samples or artefacts were retrieved which could provide a date for the site. *Fulacht fiadh* are generally identified with the Bronze Age in Ireland but examples can be found which date from the Neolithic right up to the medieval era.

The entire archaeological dimension of this project was funded by the client.

8. Non-Technical Summary

8.1 Introduction

This report details the archaeological excavation of a *fulacht fiadh* at Newtownbalregan, Dundalk, Co. Louth. This excavation was necessitated due to the proposed Dundalk Western Bypass, the construction of which would destroy the site.

8.2 Context list

A context method of recording the archaeology was used at Newtownbalregan 7. This method uses a numbering sequence for the archaeological features found. Each feature or each element in a feature is numbered one to infinity. The context list then is a full list of all the numbers allocated during the excavation (section 2 of the report).

8.3 Stratigraphic Sequence

Section 3 of the report visually shows the numbers allocated during the excavation and the relationships between them in the form of the “matrix”. These relationships are also described in words.

8.4 Interpretation of Stratigraphy

Section 4 attempts to explain what the site at Newtownbalregan 7 was and what it was used for. A dating sequence for the site is an important consideration at this point and it is attempted to show the use of the site over time.

8.5 Discussion

A wider perspective of the sites is taken in section 5 of this report. The importance of the excavation is also discussed.

8.6 Sample and Find List

This is a numbered list of the samples taken during the excavation for the purposes of analysis. No samples or finds were recovered from the excavation of this site.

8.7 Conclusions

The report concludes with a brief summation on the purpose of the excavation and its conclusions.

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10. Signing-Off Statement

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Kill,
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Signed: _____
For AEGIS ARCHAEOLOGY LTD

Dated: August 2004, final 2007