13. Roestown 2, Co. Meath: an excavation on the M3 Clonee to North of Kells motorway scheme

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Illus. 1—Location of Roestown 2, Co. Meath. The area of reclaimed marsh, Redbog, is located directly east of the site (based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland map)

Roestown 2 in County Meath is one of approximately 160 archaeological sites discovered to date along the proposed route of the M3 Clonee to North of Kells motorway scheme. The site is a multiperiod archaeological complex focused on a multiphased, D-shaped enclosure of early medieval origin with limited occupation during the Norman period and also with evidence of prehistoric activity.

Landscape and history

Roestown townland is to the north-west of Dunshaughlin village. It borders the western edge of Redbog (*Móin Ruadh*), a former marsh that has been reclaimed since the mid-19th century (Illus. 1). The Ordnance Survey Field Names Book (1837) attributed the place-name to an unspecified ancient family, *Baile an Róidh*; a more plausible derivation, however, may be 'the settlement or place associated with Red Bog' or *Baile an (Móin) Ruaidh* (Joyce 1869–1913). In the past locals referred to the townland as Raiste, the origin and meaning of which are unknown, but the 'Ra-' prefix may be a diminution of rath (ibid.), an enclosed

Illus. 2—Interpretive plan of geophysical survey results from Roestown 2, showing how the existing N3 has split the site into two areas, Area A (to the north-east) and Area B (to the south-west) (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd after GSB Prospection)

farmstead commonly known as a ringfort, a monument type that had a widespread distribution, particularly from the sixth to the 10th century AD (Stout 1997).

The site at Roestown lay within the kingdom of Deiscert Brega (Southern Brega), approximately 3 km north-west of Loch Gabair (Lagore crannog), the chief residence of Clann Chernaig Sótail, kings of Deiscert Brega, between the seventh and 10th centuries AD (Bhreathnach 1999; Cogan 1874; Hencken 1950). The crannog was in a shallow lake (now reclaimed), on the western shore of which was the monastic settlement of Dún Seachlainn (Dunshaughlin), founded in the fifth century by the Gaulish bishop Secundius (or Seachnaill) (Bradley & King 1985). The monastery was an important establishment from the eighth to the 11th century, particularly to Síl nÁedo Sláine and Clann Chólmáin, the two principal lineages that made up the dynasty known as the Southern Uí Neill. They both adopted the name 'Seachnaill'—Gilla (devotee) and Máel (servant of) respectively—in their family names, most famously Máel Seachnaill mac Domhnaill of Clann Chólmáin, who died as high king in AD 1022. A second monastery, Trevet, developed to the north-east of Roestown in the eighth century at the reputed burial site of Art, son of Conn of the Hundred Battles. One of its abbots, Cuanan (d. AD 734), is believed to have been the author of the Book of Cuana, a possible source for some entries in the Annals of Ulster (Cogan 1874).

Roestown 2 was initially revealed during an extensive geophysical survey by GSB Prospection (Illus. 2) carried out as part of an environmental impact assessment of this part of the M3 road scheme by Margaret Gowen & Co. Ltd. Test excavations in 2004 by Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd (ACS Ltd) confirmed the survival of subsurface archaeological features at the site, as well as uncovering Bronze Age burnt mounds or *fulachta fiadh* (Roestown 1 and Cooksland 3) and a charcoal production kiln (Cooksland 1) in adjacent fields. Roestown 2 (NGR 295793, 253824; height 106 m OD; ministerial direction no. A008/002) was subsequently excavated by ACS Ltd on behalf of Meath County Council and the Nationals Roads Authority (NRA).

Excavation results

The site was occupied, seemingly continuously, for a period of approximately 600 years, and this was evident in the complex stratigraphy noted from the outset of the excavations. Most features were truncated many times (Illus. 3): for example, the main enclosing ditch was filled in and re-excavated on two occasions, as were many of the associated field boundaries. The task of sorting and analysing the data recovered during the excavation is currently under way, and a sequence of development for some areas of the site has already been determined (Illus. 4).

Area A

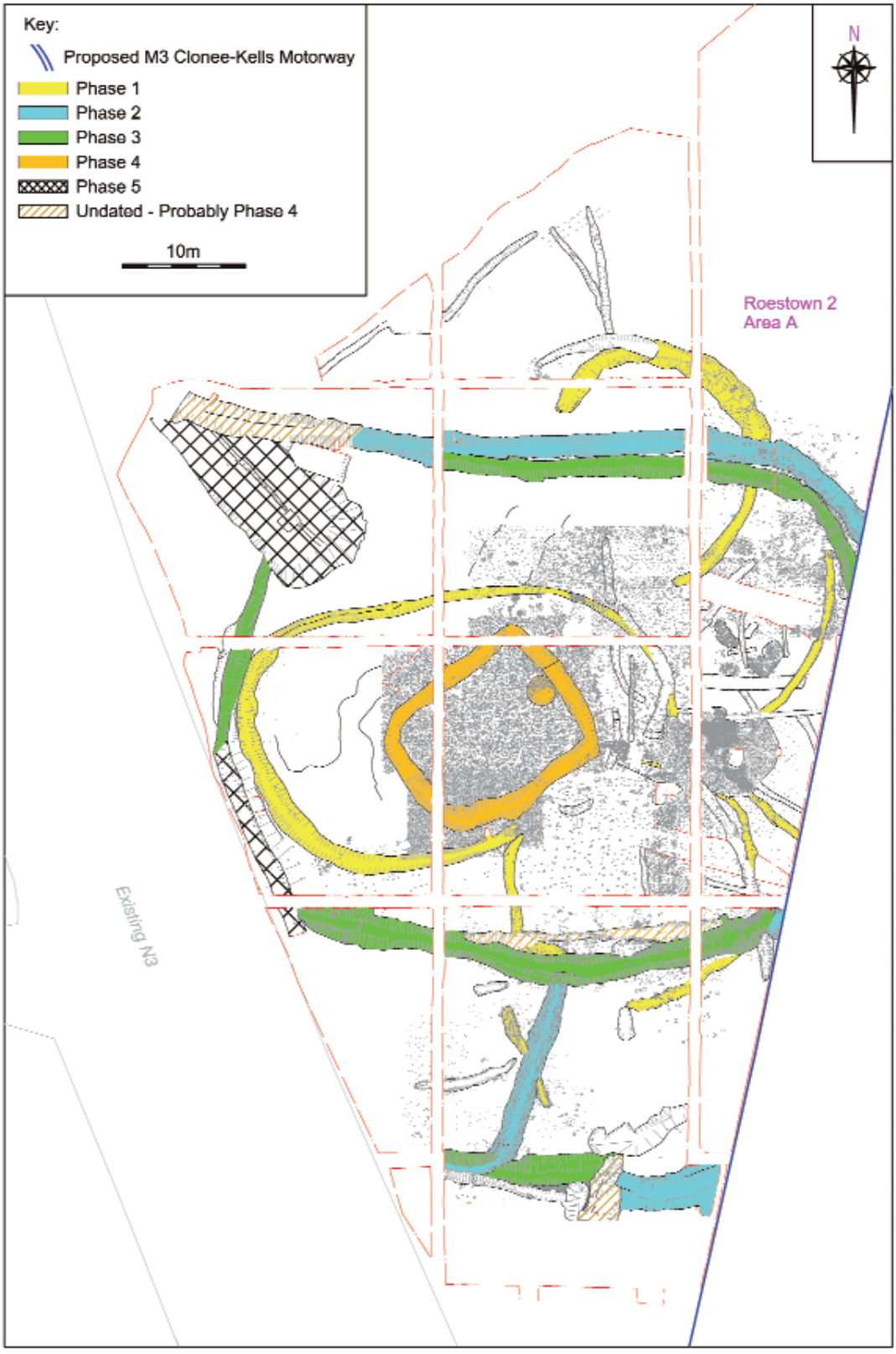
The area to the east of the N3 (Area A) developed from a series of small, irregularly shaped fields (Phase 1). The largest of these enclosed an area of approximately 25 m by 25 m and they presumably functioned as animal pens. There was no evidence for domestic occupation associated with these early enclosures, although one enclosure surrounded two disturbed human burials and may be contemporary with these. Finds included fragments of bone pins and combs, an iron knife and sherds of E-ware, a type of pottery imported from the

Illus. 3—Aerial view of excavated features from north (with Area A on the left; Area B on the right) (Studio Lab)

European mainland in the sixth and seventh centuries and found in increasing numbers on early medieval 'high-status' sites (Wooding 1996, 81; Edwards 1990, 68–9). A complete dog skeleton (Illus. 5) belonging to this phase was radiocarbon-dated to AD 630–710 (Beta-219003; see Appendix 1 for details).

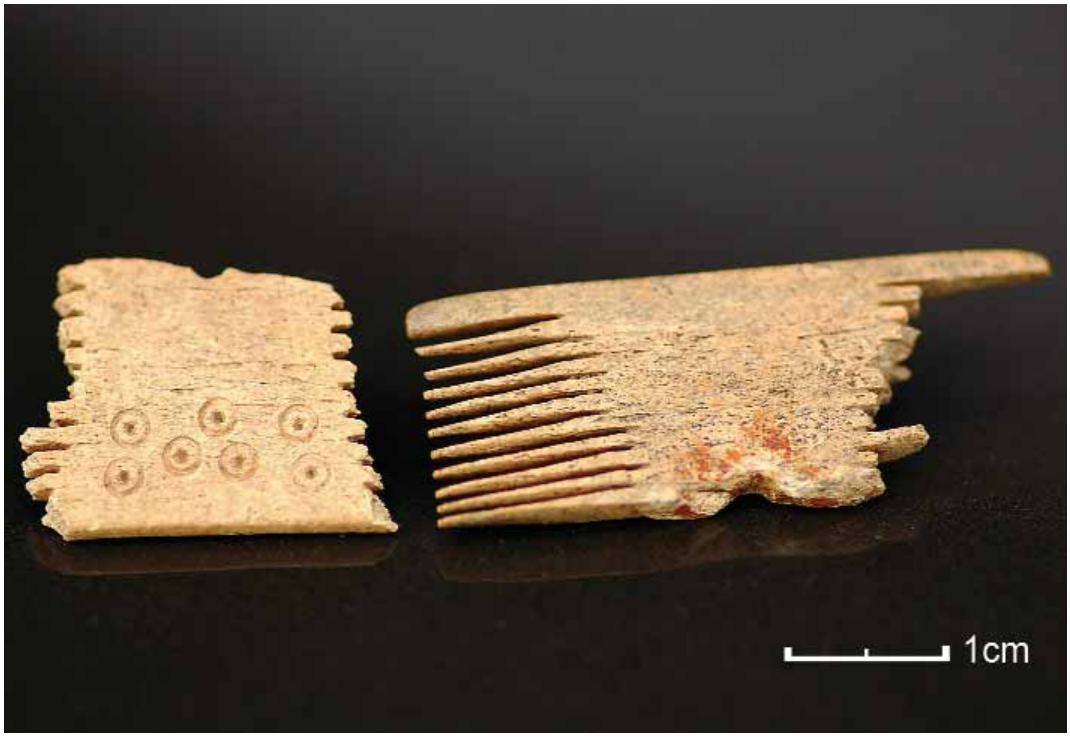
Phase 1 came to an end with a massive restructuring of the area. The earlier features were backfilled and levelled and then replaced by a substantial, U-shaped enclosure, approximately 40 m by 30 m (Phase 2). This enclosure was associated with a number of radiating ditches, all of which contained significant quantities of animal bone. The finds from this phase were typically early medieval and included bone pins, iron knives and bone comb fragments (Illus. 6). Less common artefacts included two flat stones with crude chequered patterns on them (Illus. 7), which represent an early example of an abstract strategy board-game known as 'Nine Men's Morris', or merels, and are similar to a decorated piece of mudstone uncovered at Lagore (Hencken 1950, 177, fig. 92, no. 1492) and to an incised, flat, sandstone slab from Garryduff, Co. Cork (O'Kelly 1962, 88, fig. 19). Animal bone from the U-shaped enclosure produced radiocarbon dates of AD 650–780 and AD 620–690 (Beta-219002 and Beta-219005) for this phase.

This enclosure was eventually backfilled and recut, in some areas completely removing the earlier ditch. The alteration of the enclosure from U-shaped to rectangular may have occurred during this phase (Phase 3), and many of the radial or associated ditches may also have been recut at this time. Animal bone was still found in large quantities. Among the notable artefacts were a strip of decorated bronze, a fragment of silver presumably cut off a larger object, a lignite bracelet fragment (e.g. Illus. 8), and a possible bone flute. Phase 3 has not yet been radiocarbon-dated; an eighth- to 11th-century date is likely, however. The



Illus. 4—Plan of Area A, showing the phasing of the excavated enclosures (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

Illus. 5—Intact dog skeleton found within an ancillary enclosure of the main Phase 1 enclosure in Area A (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)



Illus. 6—Bone comb fragments from U-shaped enclosure (Phase 2) (Multigraphic)

Illus. 7—Stone game-board from U-shaped enclosure (Phase 2) (Multigraphic)

Illus. 8—Lignite bracelet fragments recovered from Area B (Multigraphic)

ditches were allowed to fill up but may still have been visible in the 13th century, when a small ditched enclosure (Phase 4) was constructed at the highest point of the site, roughly centred within the enclosure described above. This enclosure (approximately 15 m by 10 m) contained a small amount of animal bone, fragments of 13th-century pottery known as Dublin-type ware, and a complete bodkin-style spearhead identified by Dr Andy Halpin of the National Museum of Ireland. Dublin-type ware is a rather coarse, wheel-thrown, glazed pottery that took a number of forms, for example jugs, bowls, pipkins, moneyboxes and storage vessels. The name implies its frequent occurrence within the greater Dublin region, but no production site or kiln exists in the archaeological record of this area (McCutcheon 2006, 58). Within this enclosed area was a single large pit containing two complete bone pins and more Dublin-type ware. As these features were situated at the highest point of the site, they were severely damaged by post-medieval ploughing and, possibly owing to this agricultural disturbance, no other internal features survived. Phase 5 represented post-medieval agricultural activity across the area as well as quarrying activity.

The broad sequence of events in Area A follows its development from characteristic early medieval field enclosures to a massive enclosure apparently wholly dedicated to the processing of animals. Many types of animal were slaughtered here, presumably for meat and raw materials such as hides, fat and bone. Evidence for bone-working was provided by broken pins, roughly shaped or unfinished bone objects and a 'blank' (a piece of shaped bone used in comb-making). In theory, a wide range of crafts and industries could have been undertaken within this area, and not all of these would be detectable from the recorded archaeological remains.

Area B

The main focus of Area B was the D-shaped enclosure on the west side of the N3. Possible prehistoric activity in this area was suggested by a circular gully that was probably truncated by the later enclosures, described below. Its shape suggests that it may have been a drip-gully for a circular house (i.e. the gully would have collected rainwater running off the roof of the house). No dates are available at present for this feature. Assorted flint and chert objects were recovered from the site, some of which may be prehistoric. Most were struck pebbles, small flakes or pieces of debitage primarily found in early medieval contexts; two hollow-based arrowheads and a third possible arrowhead were recovered from topsoil within the main enclosure, however, and are probably Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age in date.

The early medieval enclosure is D-shaped (approximately 70 m by 50 m), which is less common than the more familiar circular shape for ringforts that were constructed in the same period. This basic outline, although it contracted and expanded over time, did not alter significantly from its initial phase in the sixth century until its abandonment, probably before the 12th century. Portions of the ditches were waterlogged in places, allowing for the recovery of objects that do not normally survive on dryland sites. These included pollen, human faeces, animal dung, insect remains, leaves, grasses and wood, including a cask stave and a bucket stave. Other finds recovered from the ditch included bone pins and combs, iron knives, dress-pins, assorted unidentified objects, copper-alloy and bronze pins, and some silver items, such as studs or latches.

There were three main phases to the enclosing ditch. Animal bone from the first phase has been radiocarbon-dated to AD 530–650 (Beta-220115), although much of this ditch was removed by the second ditch, which contained animal bone radiocarbon-dated to AD

Illus. 9—Sample of metalworking artefacts found in Area B: (a) ingot mould carved from stone; (b) bone trial-piece. The trial-piece was used to practise engraving techniques and patterns (Archaeological Consultancy Services Ltd)

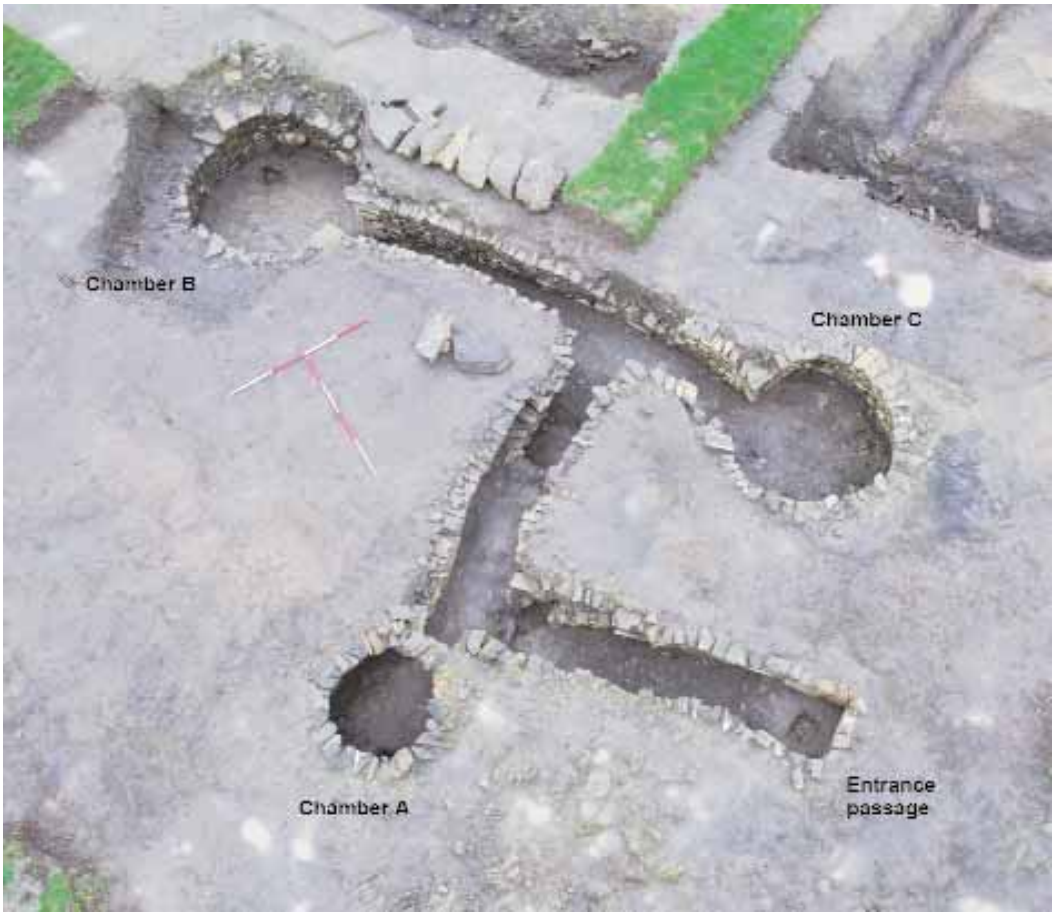
710–960 (Beta-220114). The main difference between these two phases is the nature of the entrance. The first ditch was a complete circuit, presumably spanned by a bridge. The second ditch was entered through a causeway, approximately 2 m wide and stone-lined. There was no evidence for any structures associated with these entrances, although a gatehouse could have been incorporated into the surrounding bank if it had been required. The final phase of the ditch has been radiocarbon-dated to AD 770–980 (Beta-220116).

Within the enclosure were a large number of features, the exact phasing of which has yet to be determined. There were, however, separate areas of habitation and industry, divided by a series of internal ditches. One such area, in the south-east corner of the enclosure, contained a number of cereal-drying kilns and circular gullies, which may have delimited small workshops or barns. The greater number of drying kilns in this area suggests that there was a clear division between pastoral activities in Area A and arable activities in Area B. No smithing hearths or furnaces were identified within the area of excavation, but there was evidence for metalworking, principally from wastes and residues but also from artefacts, such as crucible fragments, ingot moulds and bone trial-pieces (Illus. 9).

Souterrain

There was a souterrain or underground chamber at the centre of the enclosure (Illus. 10). This stone-built structure comprised three circular chambers connected by three passages. Some of the capstones that would have covered the souterrain remained *in situ*, but the majority had been removed in antiquity and, when found, the passages and chambers were filled with earth. There was no evidence to indicate that the souterrain related to any of the ditch phases outlined above; where souterrains do occur on multiperiod enclosures, however, they tend to be of a late date, most likely between the eighth and 12th centuries or later (Clinton 2001). A stick-pin with a distinctive stud-shaped head and dating from between the 11th and 13th centuries was recovered from the backfill in the entrance passage.

The souterrain was accessed through a ramped entrance but was not associated with any surviving house structure. The north–south entrance passage contained a constriction—a



Illus. 10—Elevated view of the drystone, three-chambered souterrain located centrally within the enclosing ditch of Area B (Hawkeye)

narrowing of the walls and a lowering of the roof—that served to impede direct access to the next passage. Crawling through this section allowed access to an east–west passage with a small circular chamber at the east end. This chamber (Chamber A) was approximately 1.73 m in diameter and survived to a height of 1.3 m. The walls were vertical up to a height of approximately 1 m; the remaining height was composed of corbelling. The capstones that would have sealed the roof were found within the chamber. The two other chambers were located to the west of this chamber and were at opposite ends of a north–south passage. Chamber B, to the south, was oval, measuring 2.95 m by 2.5 m, and survived to a height of 1.2 m. The poorly preserved walls of this chamber had been badly damaged by post-medieval ploughing. A thin deposit of clay over the natural subsoil acted as a floor surface and from this layer charcoal and bone were recovered. Chamber C, to the north, was 3 m in diameter and survived to a height of 1.4 m. A stone-lined air vent was incorporated into the southern wall and was the only such vent recorded for the structure. Each of the chambers had a pit cut into its base and these may have acted as storage pits or drainage features. Disappointingly, there was an absence of artefacts from the occupation layers within the souterrain. The stud-headed stick-pin (see above) was from a backfill deposit, which also contained a portion of a male adult skull.

Conclusions

The early medieval farmstead at Roestown was occupied, almost certainly continuously, from the sixth to the 12th century AD. Its proximity to important early medieval monastic settlements at Dunshaughlin and Trevet, as well as the crannog at Lagore, is significant. The provisional radiocarbon dates quoted above suggest that all three sites were contemporary. It is probable that there was a connection between Roestown and either of the monastic settlements. Abbots were usually from royal stock, and the leading clerics of Trevet and Dunshaughlin would certainly have been related to the kings of Lagore (Cogan 1874). The modern agricultural surroundings do little to evoke the appearance of the early medieval landscape. This large enclosure at Roestown, situated on a prominent rise flanked by a marsh and a stream, defended by deep waterlogged ditches, was the focal point of a developed agricultural industry, the extent of which we are only beginning to unravel. The task of sorting the large amount of information retrieved during the course of the excavation has only begun. Specialist examination of the environmental samples taken from the site, as well as of the animal remains and the artefacts, should, when complete, give a detailed picture of a prosperous farmstead in the early medieval period.

Acknowledgements

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