Excavations at Dun Ailinne, Co. Kildare 1968-9 Interim Report
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EXCAVATIONS AT DUN AILINNE, CO. KILDARE
1968-9 INTERIM REPORT

BERNARD WAILES

INTRODUCTION

This Interim Report outlines the main points to have derived from the excavations to date. No discussion of the documentary evidence relating to the site is undertaken here, as this is being prepared for the final report.

The work has been financed jointly by the National Monuments Branch of the Office of Public Works and the University Museum, University of Pennsylvania. Several American students were supported by Field Traineeship grants financed by the Ford Foundation. The excavators extend their warm thanks to these bodies for their support, to the several persons concerned with equipping and maintaining the excavation, to many colleagues for their advice and discussion, to the National Museum for storing the 'finds' during the winters of 1968-9 and 1969-70, and to Mr. John Thompson, the landowner, for his permission to excavate the site.

The Site (Fig. 1)

The site is on Knockaulin Hill, some two miles south of Kilcullen. It is some 34 acres of hill-top surrounded by a roughly oval bank and ditch. The bank is outside (i.e. downhill from) the ditch, and from the top of the hill no more than about 60° of arc of the bank is ever visible. These two factors would make the defence of the site gratuitously difficult, and suggest that the bank and ditch are not primarily defensive. The term 'hill-fort,' often used to describe the site, therefore seems misleading.

Within the enclosing earthwork two features only are recognisable; an arc-shaped embankment and a very diffuse low mound immediately to the north-east of it. These two features are more or less on the highest part of the hill, somewhat to the south of the centre of the site.

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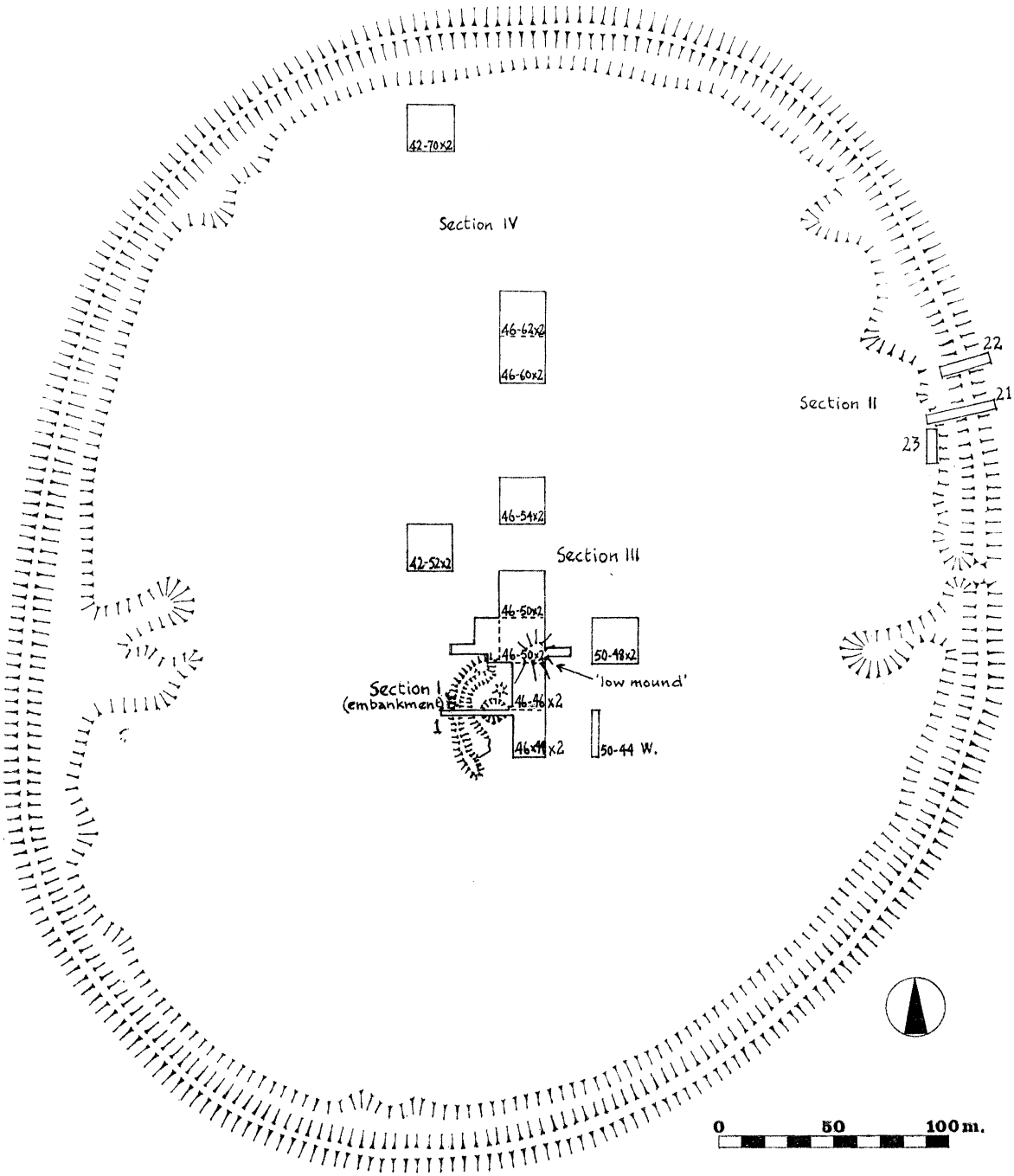
Fig 1



Dun Ailinne Knockaulin Td. Co. Kildare 1968-9 Excavation

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The bedrock is slate and greywacke, covered in most places with a thin capping of glacial till; the latter thus is the usual 'natural' (i.e., culturally sterile subsoil) in excavated areas. With the exception of the steeper north-west slope of the site, carrying rough grass, furze, bracken etc., the hill-top has been cleared and cultivated. Currently, it is under improved pasture. This includes the top of the hill where, therefore, the upper part of the present soil profile is a plough-soil.

REFERENCE SYSTEM

The site is easily contained with a 999.99 metre square grid. A ten-digit reference, therefore, indentifies a point in the site horizontally to an accuracy of 1 cm. (0.01 m.): the first five digits represent 'easting' (i.e. west to east reading), the second five are 'northing' (i.e. south to north reading). This system is based on the British Ordnance Survey National Grid reference system, adapted for archaeological site use by Martin Biddle at the Winchester excavations. For ease of reference, a given ten-metre square may be identified by its south-west corner, abbreviated by eliminating the six zeros. Thus "Square 45-48" is the ten-metre square which has the point 4500048000 (full reference) at its south-west corner. Ten-metre squares are so identified on the detail plan, (Fig. 2). On the site plan (Fig. 1) 20.0 m. by 20.0 m. squares are identified similarly; "Square 46-54x2" indicates the 20.0 m. square with grid reference 4600054000 at its south-west corner.

MAGNETOMETER SURVEY

In an attempt to discover the area or areas of occupation (if any) as soon as possible, a magetometer survey was carried out in 1968 by Miss E. K. Ralph (University Museum, University of Pennsylvania). This showed a very strong magnetic anomaly coinciding approximately with the low mound mentioned above. As indicated below, this mound proved to be composed largely of loose earth and stone incorporating occupation debris. Its maximum depth was about 1.0 m. This unusual feature presumably provided the marked variation in strength of the local magnetic field. Square 42-70 × 2, toward the north of the site, also showed a marked magnetic anomaly, but preliminary excavation showed no immediate evidence for any archaeological cause.

THE EMBANKMENT

The steep angle of slope of the bank suggested a relatively recent date for this earthwork, and this was confirmed by excavation. The northern end of the

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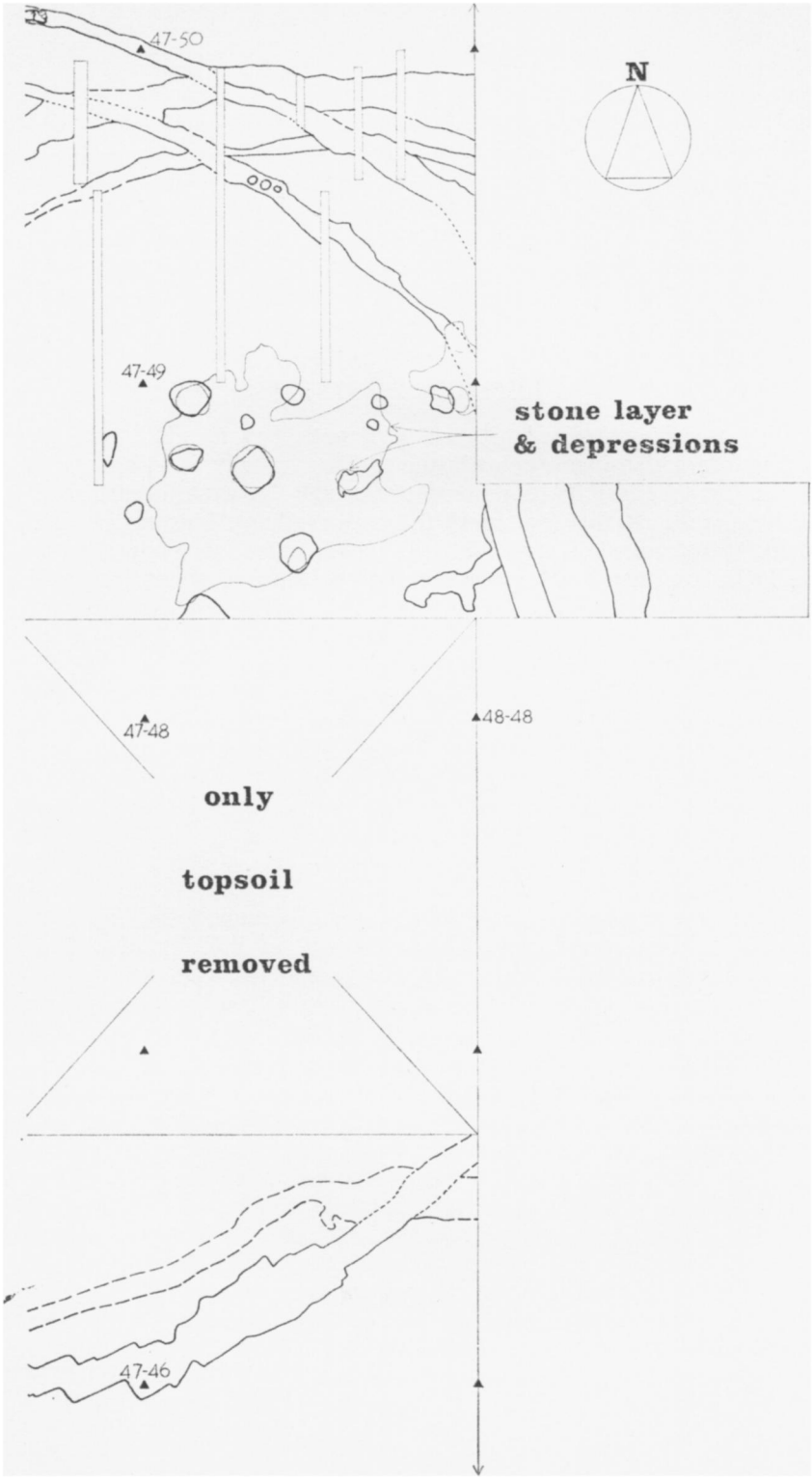

Fig. 2 Dun Ailinne, stone layer.

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embankment overlies the edge of the low mound, and the latter contains Iron Age occupation debris. A substantial humus zone separates the two stratigraphically. It seems likely that this embankment is the "rath, now destroyed" mentioned by *Camden* (p. 543). If so, we then have both *terminus post* and *ante quem* dating for its construction, although this would still leave the construction date 'floating' within a period of perhaps one thousand years, mid-first to mid-second millenium A.D. There is still no indication of its function. There is no indication that it is a destroyed rath, though it might possibly be an unfinished rath. The cutting across this feature (Fig. 1) in 1968 gave no further clue, and the matter awaits more extensive excavation, hopefully in the near future during the present excavation series.

THE ENCLOSING BANK AND DITCH

Little work has been done on this to date, with the exception of cuttings 21, 22 and 23 in 1968. There are at least eleven gaps through the bank at present. The interim site plan (Fig. 1) shows only one of these entrances, on the east side of the site. This seems the most likely candidate for an original entrance, on the basis of regularity; but no attempt has yet been made to locate the original entrance, or entrances. The inner face of the ditch shows many irregular diggings, most of which are probably the result of quarrying for stone during recent times; it is noticeable that most of the gaps through the bank are opposite these putative 'quarry pits.'

Cutting 21 was cleared mechanically for the main part, though finished by hand excavation, and Cutting 22 was excavated in similar manner to check the stratigraphy of the bank revealed in Cutting 21. In this way, by 'sacrificing' a very small proportion of the bank-ditch circumference, it was possible to appreciate very rapidly the nature of the construction. This can now form the basis for any more careful 'hand excavation' to be made in the future. The bank is a simply 'dump' construction composed of earth and stone quarried from the ditch. No clear trace could be seen of such more sophisticated constructional devices as dry-stone revetments, timber-lacing, wooden palisades, or a parapet walk. The ditch section showed a natural silting, with no indication of re-cutting. There was no indication of date, so it is impossible, on present evidence, to say whether or not this enclosing bank and ditch is contemporary with the Iron Age occupation on the top of the hill.

Cutting 23 was made immediately on the inner lip of the ditch, in order to check the possibility of features connected with the ditch and bank, such as an internal palisade. No such indications were found.

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NEOLITHIC ACTIVITY

At the western end of Cutting 1 several pits and post-holes suggest an occupation, although no clear occupation level (domestic debris etc.) was noted. No Iron Age material came from this area, but several pieces of worked flint, and a polished stone axe. This suggests the possibility of a Neolithic 'activity area' outside the range of disturbance by the subsequent Iron Age activities. A small pit in Square 44-48, between ditches A and P, contained a rim section of coarse pottery with a low cordon around the neck, and traces of light incised zig-zag decoration. Several other finds, from the Iron Age occupation level and the ploughsoil, amplify this Neolithic presence: two leaf-shaped arrow-heads and several ground stone axes or portions thereof are the most indicative. It seems likely that extension of the excavated area will eventually uncover clear evidence of a Neolithic phase of occupation or activity.

THE IRON AGE OCCUPATION

This section is divided into sub-headings, according to the main features so far excavated. Discussion is relegated to a final section of the report.

The 'Low Mound.'

This is the latest phase of demonstrable Iron Age activity on the site. The highest part is close to the 47-48 grid peg, and here its height is only about 1.0 m. from the top of the modern turf-line. It extends to cover most of the area included by the several ditches (A and B, X and Y, and P), becoming very thin toward its perimeter. It is composed of dark soil, stones and occupation detritus and, although lenses are apparent within it, there is nowhere any trace of a consolidated surface that could be termed an occupation surface. The 'finds' from this mound (below the plough-soil, that is) are all of the Iron Age, where any date can be assigned. There is no humus zone separating the mound from the consolidated occupation surface on which it rests. I conclude from these factors that the mound was deposited on the consolidated Iron Age occupation surface shortly after the abandonment of that surface, and that the mound was constructed in a short period of time. It is impossible to say, at least at present, whether the occupation material in the mound was already contained in the matrix when it was deposited (i.e., was re-deposited from an earlier occupation), or whether it was deposited as a result of temporary short-term occupation of the site while the mound was under construction. Nor is it possible to say where the mound material comes from; there are no evident quarry pits nearby and, indeed, the mound material contains little glacial till or freshly-quarried stone. It gives the appearance of being largely scraped-up topsoil. It may be that this mound was originally con-

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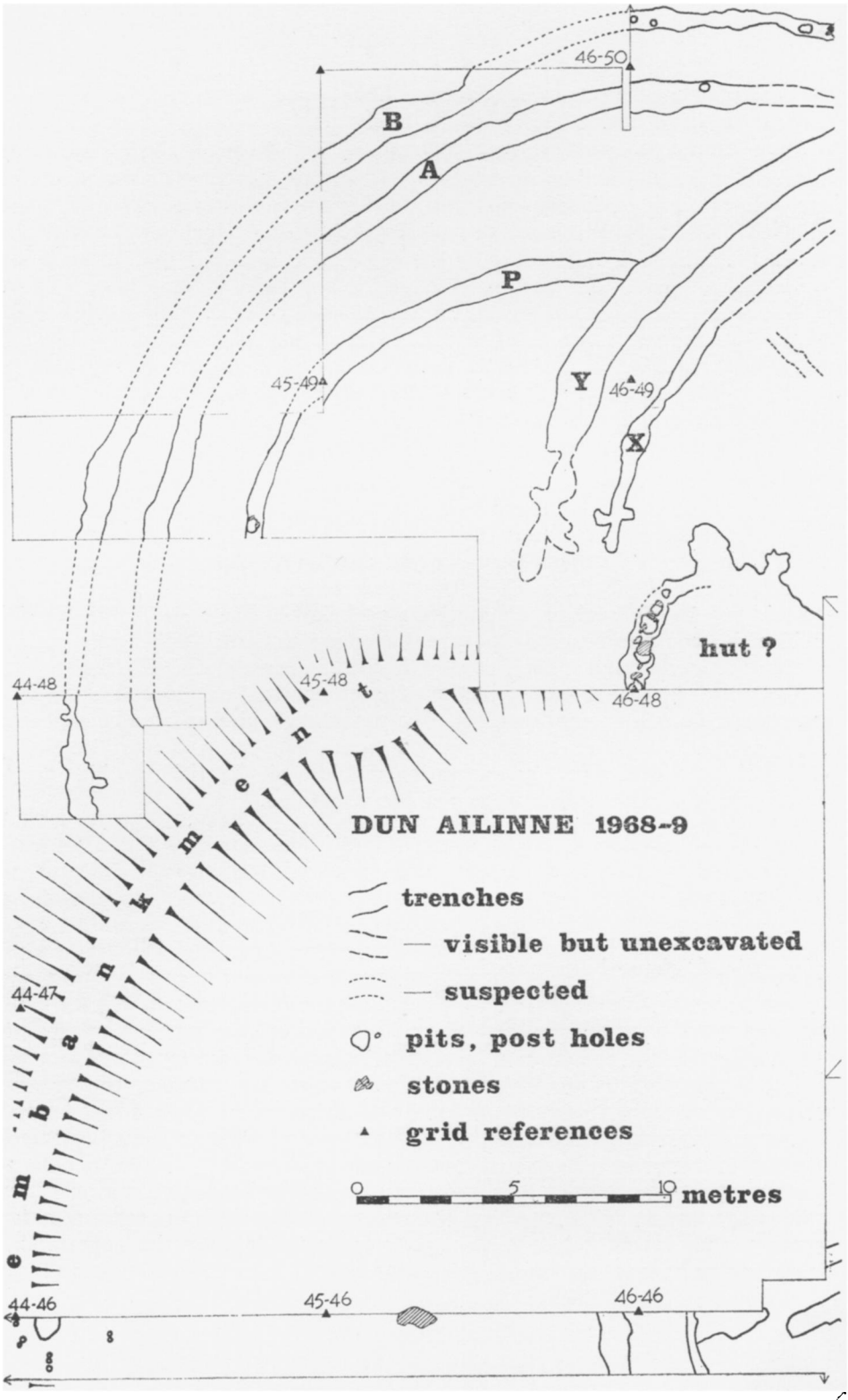

Fig. 3 Dun Ailinne, detail.

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siderably higher than its present meagre 1.0 m. or so, but since no earlier workers appear to have noticed it, it seems likely that has been inconspicuous to a degree for the past few centuries at least.

The 'Stone Layer.'

This is contained almost entirely within Square 47-48, and its outline is indicated on the detail plan (fig. 2). It was a part of the 'low mound,' being a lens within the mound. There is mound material both above and below the stone layer. It is composed of freshly-quarried slate slabs laid roughly horizontally. The stones show no trace of crushing or bruising of protruberances, let alone more general and pervasive wear. There is nothing to indicate, therefore, that this stone layer was a pavement, occupation surface, floor, or other utilitarian feature. It shows every sign of having been laid and covered up almost immediately afterwards, and this is quite in keeping with the evidence outlined above for a rapid accumulation of the low mound of which it is stratigraphically a part.

Six depressions in the stone layer were not local subsidences, but were carefully formed by laid stones. They are indicated on the detail plan, where it can be seen that five of the six overlie pits immediately beneath, while the sixth (close to grid peg 48-49) overlaps the edge of a pit below.

The thirteen pits beneath the stone layer are also stratigraphically contained within the low ground. This is evident from the upcast glacial till (the spoil from digging each pit) surrounding each pit being deposited on top of the lowest few centimetres of the mound material. The top of each pit has been cleared out by our excavation, and most show several stones just below the top of their fill. Time did not permit further excavation of these pits in 1969; probing suggests that some of them at least are deep and loosely-filled.

The Trenches

Trenches A, B, P, X and Y, indicated in the northern part of the detail plan (Fig. 3), have been traced for considerable lengths. The trenches shown on the southern part of the same plan (in Squares 46-45, 47-45, 46-46 and 47-46) lie sufficiently close to the projected curves of A/B, X/Y to suggest that they may prove to be continuations of those trenches. The sequence of trench digging is not fully resolved by excavation to date, but it is clear that P is earlier than Y, and that B is later than both X and Y. It appears that A is also later than X and Y, but excavation of the appropriate intersections is not yet far enough advanced to be sure of this.

Since X and Y run approximately parallel, as do A and B, it seems reasonable to suggest that X and Y are contemporary, and that A and B are also contemporary. If the relative dating of the various trenches is correct, we have the following sequence :

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Phase 3 — Trenches A and B

Phase 2 — Trenches X and Y

Phase 1 — Trench P

These trenches were probably palisade-trenches. This tentative conclusion is based on the following arguments :

1. Assuming that the arcs so far revealed continue in the formation of approximate circles, the diameters will be too large to suggest plausible hut outlines. The approximate diameters of both X/Y and A/B circles would be c. 40.0 m. or more.

2. The dimensions of all trenches are too small to permit an identification of them as defensive if they had been left open. Even postulating that each ditch had a corresponding bank formed from the upcast, the resultant 'defence work' would scarcely hinder a child.

3. While no clear trace could be seen of upright timbers having rotted *in situ,* there are several places where traces of packing stones or packed re-deposited 'natural' (glacial till) form circles or arcs, indicating the original presence of upright timber posts. In one or two places there are circular depressions at the bottom of a ditch, again indicating that upright posts had originally stood in the trenches.

The most plausible explanation of these trenches, then, is that they originally held rows of upright timber posts. These posts were not left to rot in place, but were removed from their sockets. The pushing and pulling no doubt necessary to loosen the posts prior to extraction, together with the extraction itself, would account plausibly for the vestigial traces of the original packed post sockets. On the basis of this interpretation, it seems that the site was dismantled before the building of the 'low mound', which took place shortly thereafter.

Trench P will probably prove to have a smaller diameter than X/Y or A/B. This factor, together with its being a single, rather than double, feature, suggests that it might have had a different function from X/Y and A/B. The latter two circles, with diameters over 40.0 m., are comparable in size to many raths. Since occupation area is evident within each circle, it is tempting to suggest that X/Y and A/B were raths of timber, rather than earth or stone, construction. The double nature of the X/Y and A/B pairs might be explained by suggesting that Y and B (the outer trench in each pair) represented the palisade proper, while X and A (the inner trenches) might have carried posts of lower height to support a parapet walk inside each palisade.

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The Occupation Area

The various trenches mentioned above enclose an area most of which shows clear traces of occupation. Much of this is still in process of excavation, so that little definitive can be said about it. It is for this reason that the detail plan (Fig. 3) shows only a very few of these internal features—those that are sufficiently certain to warrant inclusion on a plan at this stage of excavation. It is quite clear, however, that there are numerous post-holes, pits, small trenches and so forth, besides considerable quantities of finds (see below). In several places (e.g. much of Squares 45-48 and 46-48) there are probably at least two stratigraphic phases represented, with occupation evidence both above and below re-deposited 'natural.'

In the south-west corner of Square 46-48 there is an excavated depression, still only partly uncovered, which is bounded on the west side (the only portion completely uncovered so far) by a very well-defined trench containing post-holes separated by re-deposited 'natural' and/or stones—evidently the packing to hold upright timbers in place. If this arc of post-holes proves to continue, it seems likely that this feature will prove to be a circular hut about 6.0 m. internal diameter.

THE FINDS

The probable Neolithic material has been mentioned already. From the Iron Age levels, both the occupation level(s) proper and the 'low mound', have come numerous small finds of stone, bone, iron, bronze and glass. It is premature to discuss these in any detail, since none appear either to provide any arguably close dating evidence or to be particularly unusual for an occupation of this general period.

Bronze.

Three fragmentary fibulae **may** give somewhat closer dating evidence than the other finds, but these are still undergoing cleaning at the time of writing, and so have not been examined in detail.

Iron.

Most of the iron is heavily corroded and mineralized, which in many cases makes detailed observation impossible, even after cleaning, consolidation and chemical stabilization (also in progress at the time of writing). There are several ? nails, ? pins, rings, portions of knife blades and a complete short sword or long dagger (c. 0.47 m. long).

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Bone.

Besides occupation debris including cattle, sheep, pig and horse, there are a very few pieces of sawn bone indicating some simple manufacture of bone artefacts on the site.

Stone.

There are several flint flakes (artefactual, not natural), though these may well be re-deposited into Iron Age occupation from the putative Neolithic occupation or activity area (see above). However, some portions of whetstones are probably contemporary with the Iron Age occupation, as are also two fragmentary pieces of carved stone.

Glass.

Several portions of blue glass armlet/bracelet. Numerous beads, toggle and perforated; blue, amber, light green, and multi-coloured. Glass beads are notoriously difficult to date with any precision, but all these could be paralleled, in general terms, in Late Roman and Migration period cemeteries in England and Europe.

SUMMARY AND BRIEF DISCUSSION

The 1968-9 excavation seasons at Dun Ailinne have demonstrated the presence of an Iron Age occupation, probably of three constructional phases, on the top of the hill, not far from the centre of the site. No closely-datable objects have been found, but the range of artefacts is in keeping, generally speaking, with an occupation during the first few centuries A.D. The occupation area appears to be bounded by circular palisade trenches which could be interpreted as successive "timber-built raths." The end of the occupation, on present evidence, seems to have oeen a dismantling of the timber structures followed very shortly by the construction of a low mound covering most of the recently-abandoned occupation area.

Assuming the enclosing bank and ditch construction to be contemporary with the Iron Age occupation, what relation between the two may be postulated? I have suggested that the bank and ditch are not well explained as primarily defensive in intention or design. They would serve well enough to keep something in, however, even if inefficient at keeping anything out; a sustantial number of cattle could be herded into 3 acres, especially on a short-term basis. The identification of Dun Ailinne as a "Royal Site" also prompts the idea that the enclosing bank and ditch might have served to define an assembly area. These tentative suggestions are in keeping with the notion of a site of unusual socio-political importance. Enclosures of substantial size with the bank outside the ditch also occur at Emain Macha and the Rath na Riogh site at Tara, and it may

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be noted that the placing of the bank and ditch at these two sites does not indicate defence needs as a primary problem.

At both these sites, as at Dun Ailinne, much smaller circular enclosures occur inside, although admittedly no chronological relationship can be demonstrated between enclosing bank/ditch and enclosed feature. However, the occurrence of such an unusual combination of structural features at three 'Royal Sites' prompts the suggestion that the "rath inside a much larger non-defensive enclosure" may be peculiar to some 'Royal Sites'. The large mound covering the occupation at Emain Macha is also reminiscent of the 'low mound' at Dun Ailinne, though the former is far more impressive that the latter. Are these features perhaps commemorative? Again, this is a suggestion in keeping with the very considerable importance of these sites in terms of their original "Royal Occupation."

Reference

Camden : *Camden's description of Ireland,* vol.III,1789.

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