

## Excavation of an Early Medieval 'Plectrum-Shaped' Enclosure at Newtown, Co. Limerick

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This article details the archaeological excavation of features identified during test trenching in advance of the Southern Ring Road in 2001<sup>1</sup>. Two distinct phases were identified: a prehistoric Bronze Age phase including structures and burials, and a re-use of the location in the Early Medieval period. This paper presents the Early Medieval phase of activity, which was a 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure (identified as A) and a number of isolated features (identified as E), which were located to the north, east and west of the enclosure. Any relationship between the two areas, A and E could not be demonstrated stratigraphically. However, due to their proximity, an association between the two is suggested.

### Background

The site was first identified during a large-scale pre-construction ploughing and test-trenching project in advance of road construction. There was no trace of the archaeological features above the ground prior to investigation. The site was located to the east of Limerick City, in the townland of Newtown (six-inch OS map sheet 5, NGR R1625/1558). The townland of Newtown is situated in the parish of Kilmurry and the barony of Clanwilliam. It is recorded that this parish once contained several important mills, the most predominant being the paper and oil mill at Ballyclogh, the paper mill at Annacotty and the flour mills of Ballysimon (Lewis 1837, 191; O'Donovan 1840a, 7-8 and 1840b, 31-35). While there is recorded history on some of the townlands in the parish of Kilmurry, there is none in relation to Newtown.

### Excavation Methodology

The resolution project of the site at Newtown was run generally in accordance with guidelines as set out by English Heritage in its policy document *Management of Archaeological Projects* (1991) and the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands (1999) *Policy and Guidelines on Archaeological Excavation*. 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. A full excavation of the site was carried out between March and May 2001. A mechanical excavator, working under constant archaeological supervision, removed the topsoil/plough soil during the test trenching stage of the project. The revealed site was then excavated by hand by a team of archaeologists.

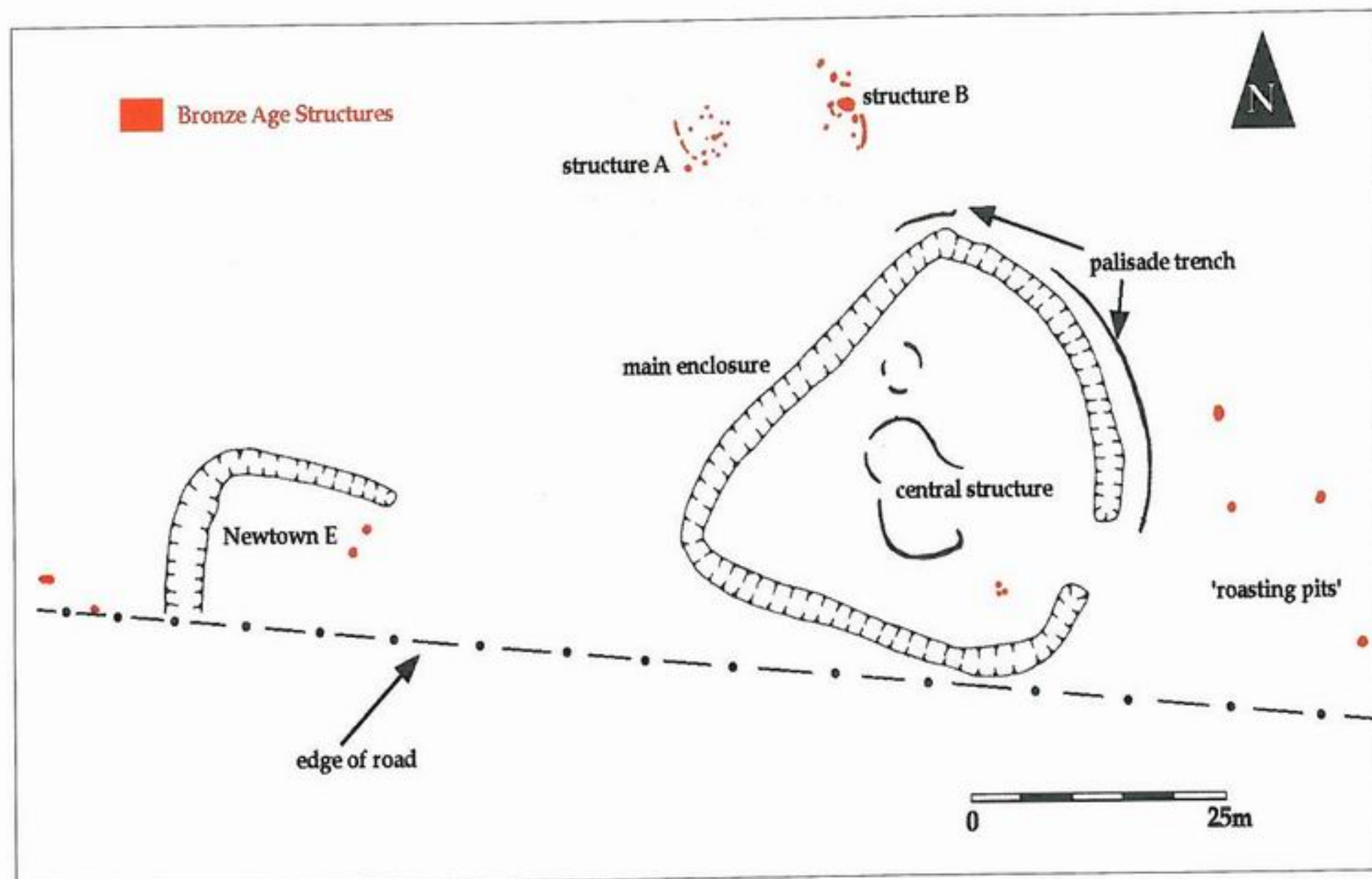
<sup>1</sup> These archaeological features were within the road take and required archaeological excavation prior to road construction: excavation licence number 01E0214.



## Interpretation

### Newtown A Enclosure: The Ditch

Ditch sections (labelled a-e) were excavated by hand and recorded at various points around the enclosure ditch. Broadly similar fills were identified around its circumference. The ditch appeared to have one initial cut, and was not re-cut. Once the sections were recorded the entire ditch cut was then emptied by hand (Fig. 1). The ditch cut was V-shaped in profile and measured 3.00m in width and 1.00m in depth. An area of stone revetment was noted where the causeway crossed the ditch at the eastern side of the site. The enclosure had a maximum diameter of about 50.00m. No trace of an internal bank remained although it is suggested that the enclosure probably once had one.



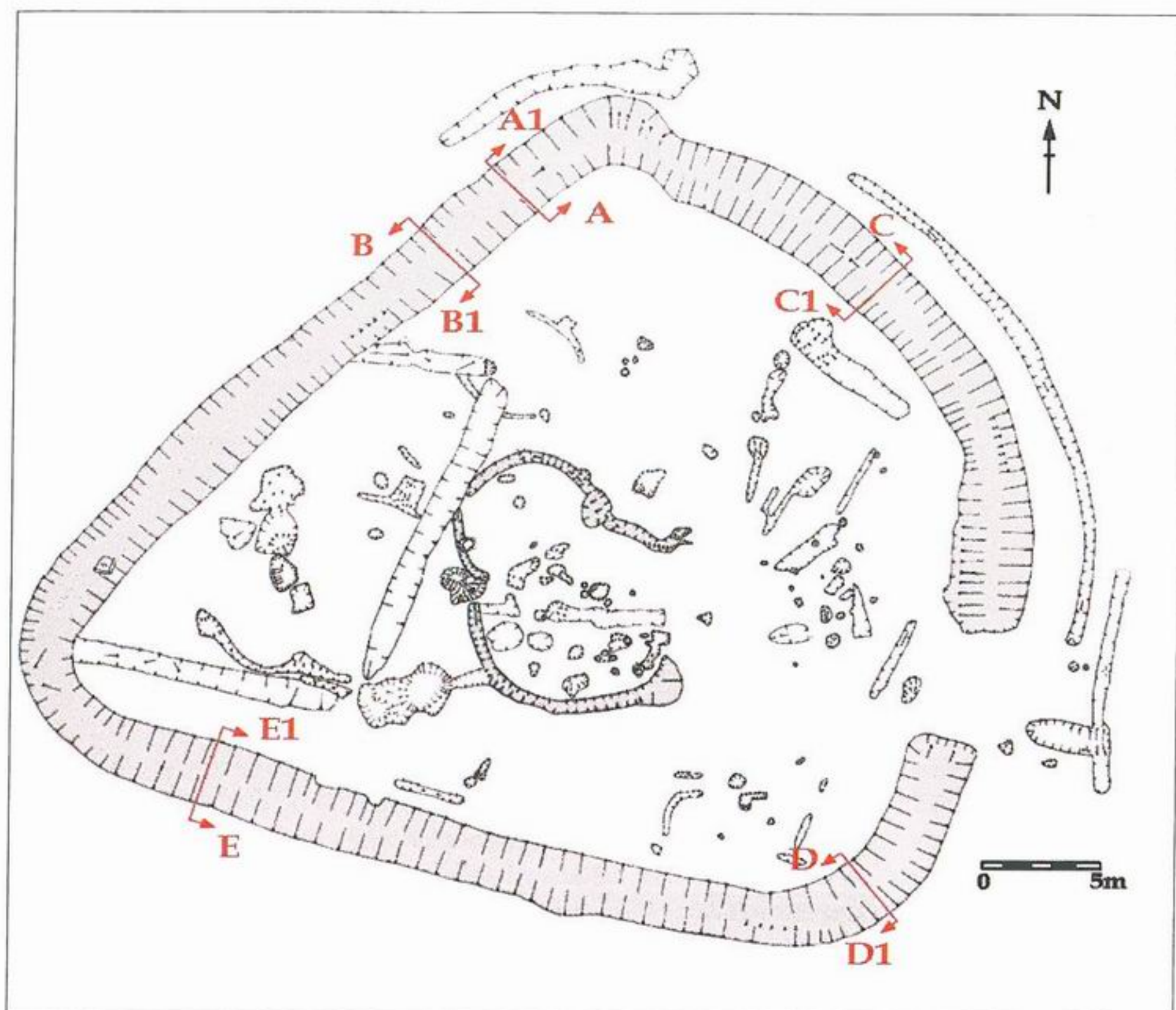
**Fig. 1** Post-excavation plan of site including Newtown (A), main enclosure, and (E) partial enclosure, red indicates prehistoric features

### Ditch Sections (Figs 2-5)

Section A, the uppermost (latest) fill, extended across the width of the ditch and was broadly similar to that found in ditch section C. Six other fills were excavated from this section. The most substantial was the basal fill, which extended across the width of the ditch, and had a maximum depth of 0.60m. This may represent deliberate backfilling of the ditch at this point, and the intervening layers between the top and bottom fills appear to be tip lines from this back filling episode. As such it might be suggested that the ditch cut and then filled over a short period of time, perhaps with the removal of the bank material.

Section B contained the most fills. In this section the uppermost fill was the largest, while the lowest fill may represent silting at the base of the ditch. The intervening layers again might represent tip lines from various episodes of backfilling.





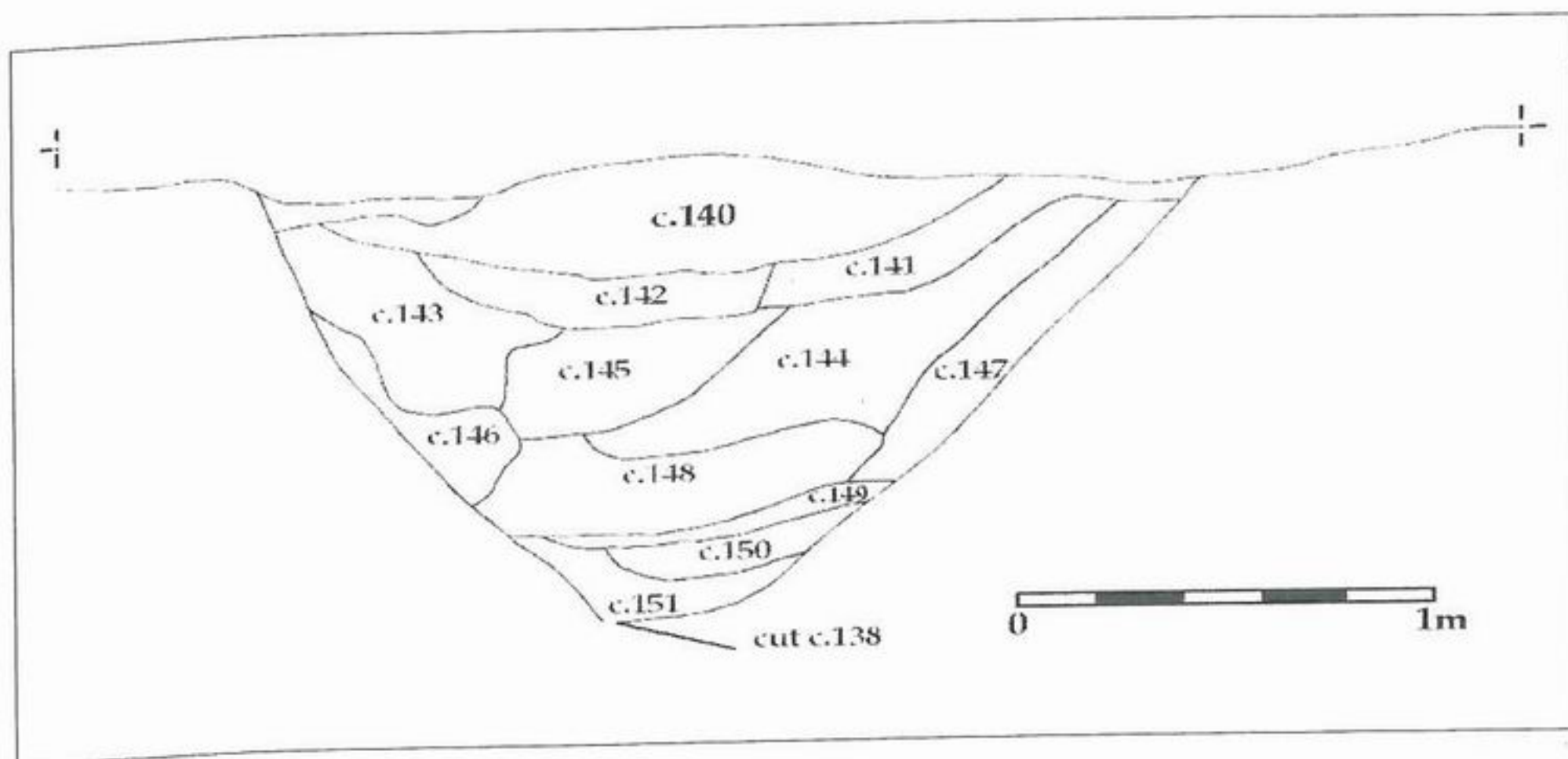
**Fig. 2** Plan of main 'plectum-shaped' enclosure (A), showing main ditch, external palisade trench to northeast, eastern entrance, and internal features including central structure. Red indicates ditch sections

Section C was very similar to section D. The upper fill of the ditch extended across almost the entire width of the trench. The bottom fill again might represent silting up of the base of the ditch during the period when it was open to the elements. The intervening layers appeared to represent tip lines associated with the deliberate filling of the ditch.

Section D had three uppermost layers which were substantial, the latter fill extending across the entire ditch width. The remaining fills, down to the base probably represented the back filling of the ditch.

Section E exhibited all the characteristics of having been backfilled, as a series of tip lines extended from the same side of the ditch. However, one fill was noted as a filling of the ditch from outside the enclosure. The base of the ditch at this point was excavated down to the limestone bedrock.





**Fig. 3** Ditch Section B-B1 (numbers refer to different fills)

### Entrance

The entrance was located on the eastern side of the 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure, and measured 5.00m in width. It was a causewayed entrance, formed by an un-dug portion of the ditch. A series of postholes and a slot trench, uncovered immediately inside the entranceway may all be part of a possible gate house, which may have controlled access into the enclosure interior via the causeway. Immediately inside the entrance was an area of cobbling associated with the postholes. This layer displayed evidence of two different phases. A layer of small angular cobbles had been partially covered by another layer of larger cobbles. This would apparently indicate an attempt at repairing or re-surfacing the entrance area.

### Interior of Enclosure

A series of linear features, some very shallow, were excavated in the interior of the enclosure. No finds or dating evidence was recovered from these features, and it is likely that some of these, due to their irregular-shape, may be the remains of rabbit burrows, as the natural parent material in the area was sand. A long narrow linear feature was also excavated to the north of these features, but its date or function remains unknown. A large pit was situated to the southwest of the circular central structure. A flint blade and a quantity of charcoal were recovered from its fill.

A series of drains was noted in the western half of the interior of the enclosure. The largest was a north-south running feature, probably the remains of a field drain. It produced modern pottery and glass. Various other pit features were located to the west of the central structure, some substantial, but had no stratigraphic relationship with each other, being under the topsoil and cut into the natural parent material. Their precise function remains unknown.

### Central Structure

The most intensive evidence of activity within the enclosure was found in its centre where an almost 'figure-of-eight' structure was situated (Fig. 6). This measured 11.00m internally north-south by a maximum of 9.00m. It might be that this was actually a composite of two structures. A large amount of pit and posthole activity occurred in the southern interior of this structure, partially delineated by a





**Fig. 4** Ditch Section B-B1, from SW



**Fig. 5** Ditch Section C-C1, from NW



shallow internal east-west linear trench. A green glass bead with yellow painted herringbone decoration (A. Kennedy pers.comm.) was recovered from the fill of this cut (01E0214:21:2). A shallow pit to the north of this trench, though also within the central structure produced a dark blue glass bead (01E0214:544:1). The slot trench for the structure on its southern side, contained two separate fills, and included finds of a glass armlet, an iron knife and a socketed implement (01E0214:10:3; :10:1; :14:2 respectively). The slot trench on the northern side of the structure produced a flint scraper, the top of an adult human skull (sex undetermined), aged about 30 years (identification by L. G. Lynch) and some animal teeth (01E0214:27:10; :27:9; :27:7; :27:8 respectively). Again very little stratigraphic evidence was encountered, and no distinct layers of occupation were noted.



**Fig. 6** Aerial view of central structure at Newtown A, North to left

### **Circular Structure**

About 1m to the north-northwest of the central structure another smaller circular slot trench was excavated. This had been severely truncated by later drainage activity in the area, though its maximum diameter was approximately 5.00m. While a definite entrance could not be located, it is suggested that a small posthole at one of the terminals of the slot trench may mark its site. No dating evidence was recovered from this circular feature.

### **External Features to Newtown (A)**

A number of features were uncovered during topsoil stripping of the area to the east of the main enclosure. Although several features, such as shallow postholes and truncated pits were grouped together in the one area, none inter-cut one another, and no stratigraphy was in evidence. One group



were located within an area approximately 20m<sup>2</sup>. They would appear to have been part of a single period of activity as they were concentrated, but this cannot be proven because of the absolute lack of stratigraphic evidence. This collection of features did not produce a recognisable pattern, but does mark activity in this area, external to the 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure.

A second concentration of features was excavated on the immediate eastern side of the main enclosure. These proved to be the remains of four pits and one deposit of burnt stone. Again, none of these pits had a stratigraphic, or indeed a physical relationship with each other. The pits in question were all filled with burnt stone and were identified as roasting pits. As in the case of *fulachta fiadh*, these site types may have had a long period of usage, and cannot be definitively dated by morphology alone. These features may date to any of the phases of activity uncovered at Newtown.

### **Newtown (E)**

This area of the site was located some 25.00m to the west of the 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure (A). It was initially thought that this was the remains of a levelled *fulacht fiadh*, due to the presence of burnt stone in the fill, which was contained within an irregular cut. This feature was cut in turn by a substantial curving ditch. No diagnostic find was recovered from the fill of this ditch, nor was any datable charcoal retrieved. The eastern side of this ditch feature was truncated by a substantial north-south field boundary and to the south by the limit of excavation. It was therefore impossible to ascertain its true shape through excavation. The field boundary was substantial, and had its own deep ditch on its eastern side. It is likely to have obliterated the possible curving enclosure ditch, as no evidence for the continuation of the enclosure was found on the eastern side of the field boundary. Indeed, the field boundary may have actually incorporated the return of the enclosure ditch. From the plan of this ditch, however, it might be suggested that it formed part of an enclosure. It might also be speculated that this possible enclosure at Newtown (E) was part of a larger 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure like Newtown (A).

Some low level features were also uncovered within enclosure (E). Two of these were probably field drains, while two circular pit-like features did not produce any datable material. At the western side of the enclosure two short stretches of possible slot-trench were noted. These trenches were shallow and aligned north-south, and were truncated at south by edge of the road take. Therefore, it is quite likely that associated archaeological features lie beyond the road take immediately to the south of the site. These excavated features lay directly underneath the topsoil, cutting the natural parent material and almost no stratigraphy was in evidence.

### **Radiocarbon Date Determinations (2 sigma estimations)**

Suitable samples were sent from several features on the site for radiocarbon dating analysis (charcoal identification by E. O'Carroll). From the 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure charcoal from the slot-trench of the central house yielded a date of AD700-1015 (Beta 182313). A post-hole fill containing charcoal, which also contained a honeystone produced a date of AD795-1280 (Beta 182314). Charcoal from the basal fill of the enclosing ditch was dated to AD795-1030 (Beta 182317), while charcoal from an upper fill, which may date the final leveling of the site, produced a date of AD1010-1300 (Beta 182323).

### **Discussion**

This site at Newtown had at least two distinct phases of archaeological activity. The earlier phase dates to the early Bronze Age and included structures, large pits and burnt mound material, as well as several burials (Coyne forthcoming). The later Early Medieval phase was centred on a large sub-



triangular 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure and associated pits, structures and artefacts (Fig. 7). A cluster of large pits were also noted to the east of the main site at Newtown (A). No finds were associated with these enigmatic features. It has been suggested that these pits may be 'pot-boilers' or possible roasting pits, and may have had a variety of functions.



**Fig. 7** Newtown A, 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure from W

### **The Plectrum-Shaped Enclosure (A)**

Originally only the central 'figure-of-eight' structure was noted during the test trenching phase of the road. Further examination of the area around the central area revealed that it was part of a larger complex. An enclosure, dubbed 'plectrum-shaped' due to its sub-triangular plan was uncovered, maximum width 50.00m, with a single 5.00m wide causewayed entrance to the east (Coyne and Collins 2003). The ditch was V-shaped in profile and averaged 3.00m in width. This ditch was partially surrounded on its eastern side through to its northern side by a narrow trench, interpreted as a possible external palisade slot trench. All features were uncovered immediately below the topsoil, with very little inter-cutting of features.

A small but interesting range of artefactual material was excavated, concentrated in two main areas in the main site (Fig. 8). From the radio carbon determinations and the artefact assemblage the main concentration of activity on the site dates to the Early Medieval period. Some of these finds include an iron knife, hone-stones, an iron socketed implement (which is too corroded to be accurately



identified) and a possible linen smoother (01E0214:10:1; 10:2; 33:4; 27:4; 14:2; 1:17 respectively). The most diagnostic, however, are the glass artefacts. Two glass beads were recovered as well as portion of a blue glass armlet (01E0214:21:2; 544:1; 10:3 respectively, Fig. 8). The more impressive of the glass beads is a green glass example with a herringbone decoration in yellow paint. A similar example was found at the Early Medieval ecclesiastical site at Reask, Co. Kerry. This type of bead is of Irish manufacture and dates to the second half of the first millennium AD (Fanning 1981, 121). A parallel can be found for the iron knife from Knockea, Co. Limerick. As in the case of the site at Newtown, Knockea is also situated on a low hill. Knockea is part of a wider complex of sites, some of unusual morphology. The iron knife was recovered from the floor of a house and was, according to the excavator, similar to other examples from Early Medieval sites (O'Kelly 1967, 93). The blue glass bead is a ubiquitous example. They are almost impossible to date in isolation, and may date from the Bronze Age through to the Early Medieval period (Warner and Meighan 1994, 52).

The most interesting artefact recovered from the site is the portion of a blue glass armlet with white decoration. The craftsmanship involved in producing such an item of jewellery is of the highest quality, and this artefact can be paralleled with finds from elsewhere in Ireland (Carroll 2001). It is important to note that the parallels for this artefact come from high status sites such as Lagore, Co. Meath (Eogan 2000, 79), a crannóg dating to the Early Medieval period. The example from Lagore is on display in the National Museum of Ireland, while another almost identical example from Ireland is in the National Museum of Denmark (Eogan 1991, 165). Lagore had a period of use from the 7th to 10th centuries, and the blue glass armlet presumably dates from this period. However, it is worth noting that items of value may have had a long period of usage, and may have been retained as treasured heirlooms, and have been in circulation for a considerable period of time until being finally lost or deposited in the ground. Geographically, the closest parallel for the armlet at Newtown was found during the excavations at Carrig Aille II, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick (Carroll 2001, 113; Ó Ríordáin 1949).

The central 'figure-of eight' structure at Newtown may have been a combination or amalgamation of two semi-circular structures. This is similar in ground plan, although it must be pointed out, not in construction technique, as structures A and B, and also C and D, from Reask Co. Kerry, which were conjoined circular stone huts (Fanning 1981, 91-2) and other similar structures have been found at Early Medieval sites (Lynn 1986). Pits from within the central structure at Newtown produced both glass beads. However, it was the northern section of the central structure slot trench, which produced the most intriguing finds. Here a flint scraper was found with the top of a human skull and some animal teeth, identified as horse (01E0214: 27:7; 27:8). This appears to have been a deliberate deposition, presumably a foundation deposit in the erection of this structure. If this is the case, the occupants of this site, may have retained some pagan beliefs, perhaps when the majority of people were converting to Christianity. Alternatively, it may have been a folklore, superstition, *piseog* or foundation ritual, as has been documented in early modern Ireland (Estyn-Evans 1957), although the use of a human skull is highly unusual in these circumstances. This deposition had all the appearance of a pagan rite, and coupled with the unusual shape of the enclosure itself, does raise many intriguing questions as to the exact nature of this site.

It would be too easy to describe this site as a ringfort and this would be to deny the enclosure's morphology. It has an entrance on its south eastern side, probably to shelter it from the prevailing winds (Stout 1997, 18), and both the artefacts and the radiocarbon dates would seem to date the main activity on site to about the 8th to the 11th centuries AD, with levelling perhaps occurring as late as the 13th century. The earliest dates fall within the accepted date range for the usage of ringforts, namely the beginning of the 7th century to the end of the 9th century (*ibid*, 30). However, for its size,



there is an almost complete absence of animal bone and general occupation activity from the site, which implies that it may not have had a settlement function. However, despite the comparable date range the 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure at Newtown does not fit comfortably into the present classification of ringforts.

If not a ringfort, then, what exactly is the enclosure at Newtown? The origin of ringforts in Irish archaeology is a vexing question. Did they come into use in the Iron Age, or were they an Early Medieval innovation? (Limbert 1996; Edwards 1990, 17; O'Kelly 1951). Indeed, it has been pointed out in various sources that the term ringfort is a misnomer, and there is some degree of disagreement as to their effectiveness in a defensive situation. This leads to the question as to whether the term 'fort' actually applies to the monument type at all (Limbert 1996, 252).

Neither has the 'ring' part of the term been addressed. What actually constitutes a 'ringfort', and to what degree is the circularity an important element. It must be pointed out, that as tens of thousands were constructed, after the same fashion, in the space of three hundred years, shape must have been a defining factor (Stout 1997, 24). Following on from this, can archaeologists then differentiate between ringforts and other oddly shaped enclosures? Do they have a different genesis to each other, utilised by different peoples, or do they display a difference in status? Certainly the finds from Newtown seem to indicate that this site was occupied by a high-status group, in the Early Medieval period.

It appears that the type of enclosure represented by Newtown is present in the archaeological landscape, but is hidden. In the absence of a clearly defined typology they have been labeled 'ringfort' or 'enclosure'. Several of the published archaeological inventories for various counties in Ireland show enclosures that are indeed 'plectrum-shaped', or non-circular at the very least, for instance Cloonigny County Galway (Alcock *et al.* 1999, 105) or Oakleypark, County Offaly, sited near the ecclesiastical site of Seir Kieran (Stout 1997, 105). Aerial reconnaissance, as well as field survey also appears to be shedding light on unusual previously unrecorded enclosures. Barrett's work in Counties Carlow and Kildare has highlighted several of these unusually shaped enclosures, some of which might be described as 'plectrum-shaped', although this term is not used (Barrett 2002). Perhaps one important reason why these sites are not commonly identified through field survey is that their banks and ditches may not have been substantial and therefore easily leveled, thereby obliterating any surface indication of the monuments.

Two sites that have been recently excavated appear to conform to the 'plectrum-shape', Killickaweny, County Kildare (Walsh and Harrison 2003) and Balriggeran, County Louth (Delaney and Roycroft 2003). These sites bear some similarities to the Newtown enclosure, though they have been initially described as 'heart-shaped' elsewhere (Delaney and Walsh 2004). The artefacts recovered are all of generally high quality, which would suggest wealthy occupants and their dating is of similar range. A third unusually-shaped enclosure has been recently discovered in county Clare (S. Joubert pers. comm.)

Due to the lack of identification of these monuments in the field and their low excavated numbers, the favoured siting is difficult to ascertain. Newtown was situated near the crest of a hill, as are two recently identified plectrum-shaped enclosures near Lahinch, County Clare and Tralee, County Kerry (M. Connolly pers. comm.). From this, a broad trend might be established, which appears to be exclusive to ringforts, which generally favour a more mid-slope location (Edwards 1990, 20).

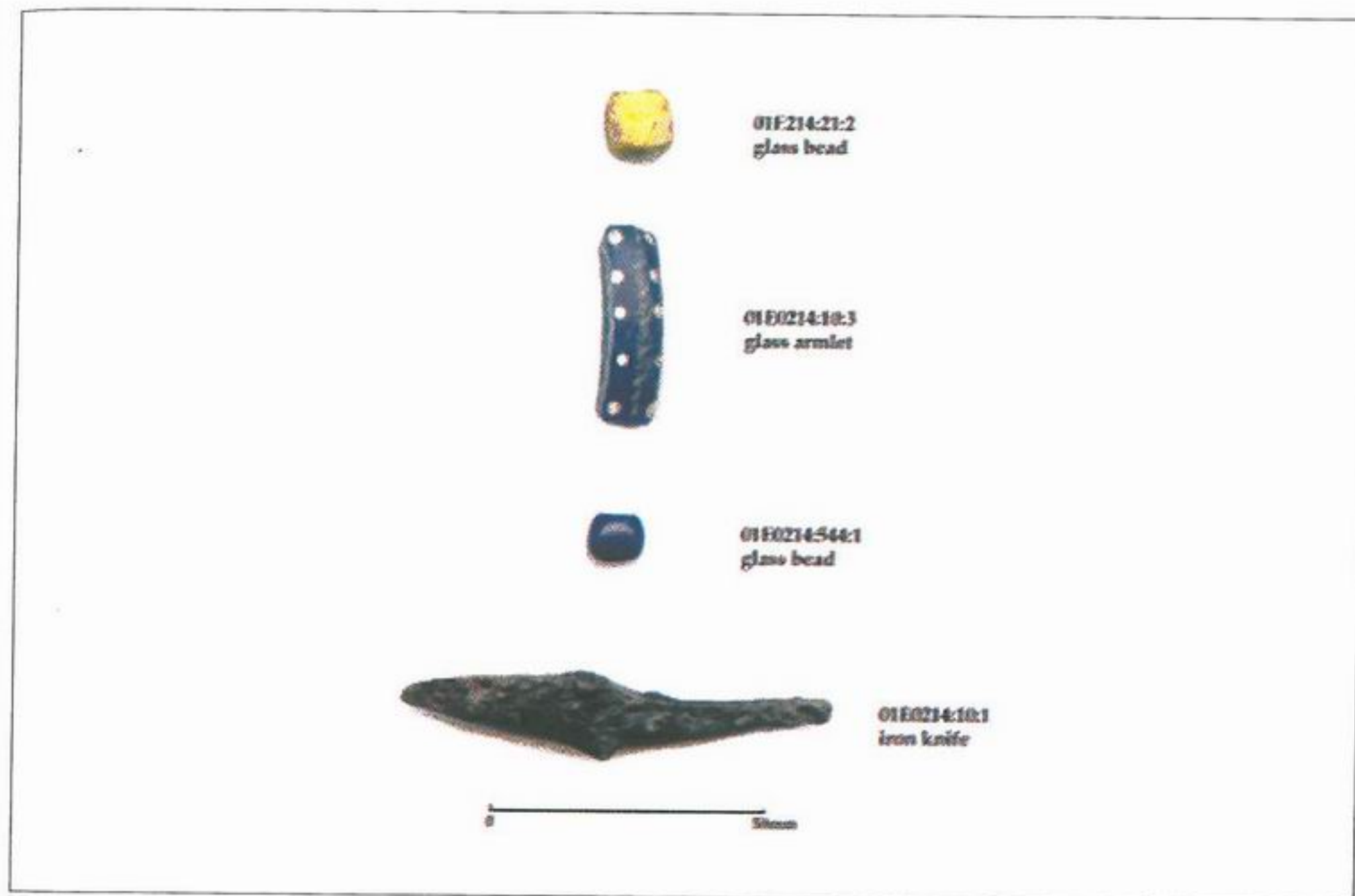
## Conclusions

This site at Newtown was excavated in advance of the construction of the Limerick Southern Ring Road. It was initially identified in the course of test trenching in advance of the construction phase. It showed no above ground indications prior to archaeological works commencing. A vast range of



archaeological material was excavated as part of this project. This included several prehistoric features, several pits interpreted as possible roasting pits, as well as a large sub-triangular enclosure with associated structures and artefacts. The archaeological material uncovered spanned at least 3,000 years, from the earliest part of the Bronze Age (c.2,000 BC), up to the Early Medieval period (beginning c.AD 500).

The excavation of this site at Newtown has served to alert us to the diversity of archaeological sites which await discovery in the countryside. The excavation of this 'plectrum-shaped' enclosure demonstrates that there may have been a variety of sites in use in the Early Medieval period in Ireland, and so at Newtown may yet prove to be the tip of the iceberg, when it comes to the study of the settlement sites of this period.



**Fig. 8** Selection of artefacts from Newtown (A)



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