

The metal objects from Ballybane, Co.
Dublin (13E0471)

Introduction

During the excavation of an Early Medieval enclosed complex with possible ceremonial character at Ballybane, Co. Dublin several metal objects were found (O’Flanagan and O’Hora 2016). These consisted mainly of iron knives and blades, some nails but also socketed objects, a ring and a perforated strip, all iron. A copper-alloy ring is probably of modern date. Several radiocarbon dates put the complex in the early medieval period (6th to 9th centuries) and deposits of disarticulated animal and human bone are interpreted as pointing to a ceremonial function. Some of the knives, mainly retrieved from fills of the inner circular ditch of the main, northern enclosure, are possibly related to the de-fleshing of these bones.

Description of the objects

The site consists of a large double-ditched enclosure in the north with a smaller attached on its southern side and a further small enclosure further south again. The knife typology follows Blakelock (2012: 81), which uses both the shape of the back of the knife and the position of the tang in regard to the blade (Fig. 1).

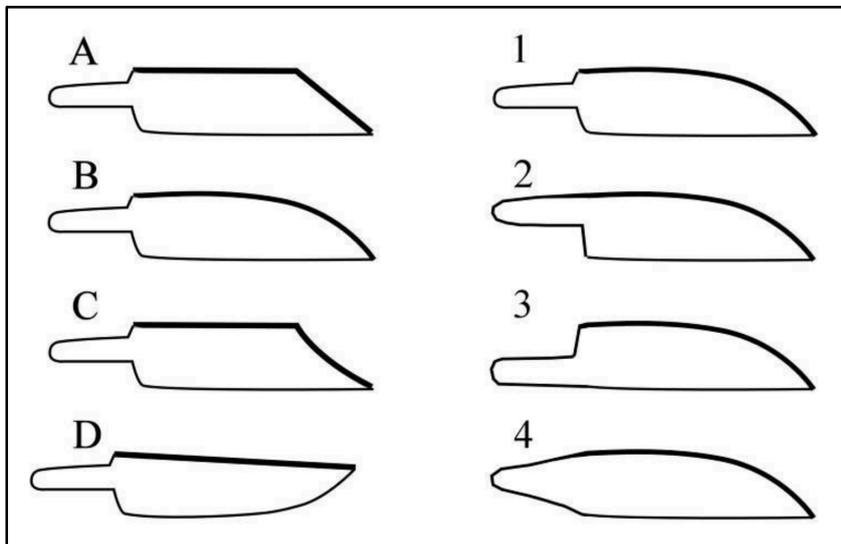


Fig. 1. *Knife typology after Blakelock 2012*

Most of the metal find from the northern-most enclosure came from its inner circular ditch (C6000). Located in the north and west of C6000, basal fill C6028 yielded two flat curved rectangular pieces of iron, while two iron knives (Types B2 and D1, Figs. 2 and 3) and a square flat fragment of iron were recovered from mid-fill C6027 in the same part of that ditch. A furrow (C6094, fill C6021) cutting upper fill C6026 of C6000 in that same north-western area yielded a further iron knife (Type B2, Fig. 4) and a square fragment of iron. Upper ditch fill C6026 contained late medieval pottery and probable cinders from modern coal-fired heating processes (Rondelez 2017).

In the south-western part of C6000, four fragments of a perforated narrow strip of iron (Fig. 5) and a possible nail shank were found in basal fill C6032. Mid-fill C6045, in the same area of C6000, yielded two possible blade fragments corroded together. A likely iron nail was found in a mid-fill (C6013) in the south-eastern part of inner ditch C6000, while a rectangular-sectioned probable nail shank was retrieved from upper fill C6057 in the eastern part of that ditch.

A likely blade tip (knife Type D) was recovered from basal fill C5131 within ditch C5132, which is both the southern part of the outer ditch of the northern most enclosure and the northern part of the adhering central enclosure. A flat, slightly curved fragment of iron was found in the upper fill (C5031) of the eastern part (C5137) of the ditch of the central enclosure.

Mid-fill C5136 of linear feature C5150, which veers off to the south-west from that same central enclosure, yielded an iron ring (Fig. 6). A similar ring was found at Raystown ringfort, Co. Meath (Seaver and Rajic 2009:29 and Illustration 10). A probable blade fragment was found in upper fill C5162 of that same linear feature.

The only metal object from the southern-most enclosure was recovered from fill C687 within pit C688. It consists of a short fragment of an iron strip, possibly with a perforation on one end and possibly a small nail towards the other end (Fig. 7). It is similar to perforated strip from northern-most enclosure.

Quite a few metal objects were recovered from the topsoil (C560) and redeposited subsoil C527. Among these were two iron sockets, one of which could be a gouge, a woodworking tool (Figs. 8 and 9), an iron knife (Type B2, Fig. 10), a curved iron band with a rivet (Fig. 11) and a copper-alloy ring, probably of modern date (Fig. 12).

Conclusions

The amount of metal objects, especially those from secure contexts, is rather limited. What is striking, however, is the large proportion of knives and fragments thereof compared to other object types. The majority of these knives were recovered from the inner ditch of the northern-most and largest enclosure. That same inner ditch also had the deposits suggesting a ceremonial character of the site: a cluster of cattle mandibles, a cattle skull together a human femur and two quern stones. Some of the knives are possibly related to de-fleshing of these cattle bones; the deposit of mandibles is within the same fill (C6027) from which two of the knives were recovered. The two other deposits, however, are stratigraphically younger: the querns were deposited in a re-cut of C6027 and the skull and femur were found in a pit which cut the upper fill of the ditch.

Bibliography

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Pictures



Fig. 2. Iron knife (Type B2) from fill C6027 (ditch C6000) after conservation



Fig. 3. Iron knife (Type D1) from fill C6027 (ditch C6000) after conservation



Fig. 4. Iron knife (Type B) from furrow fill C6021 after conservation



Fig. 5. Perforated strip of iron from fill C6032 (ditch C6000) after conservation



Fig. 6. Iron ring from fill C5136 within linear feature C5150, after conservation



Fig. 7. Possibly perforated iron strip from fill C687 within pit C688, after conservation



Fig. 8. Possible socketed gouge from topsoil C560 after conservation



Fig. 9. Iron socket from topsoil C560 after conservation



Fig.

10. Iron knife (Type B2) from topsoil C560 after conservation



Fig. 11. Curved iron band with rivet from topsoil C560 after conservation



Fig. 12. Copper-alloy ring from topsoil C560 after conservation

Catalogue

Cut	Fill	Feature type	Description	Dimensions (mm)
n/a	527	Subsoil	Corroded possible nail shank with a round section.	34 x 7 x 7
n/a	527	Subsoil	Corroded possible nail tip with a round section.	19 x 4-7 x 3-7
n/a	527	Subsoil	Corroded possible nail tip with a round section.	11 x 4-7 x 4-7
n/a	560	Topsoil	Round copper-alloy ring with ellipse-shaped section It has a deep groove on the lower side parallel to the rim. Probably modern.	Ring: 28 x 28 Section: 3 x 2
n/a	560	Topsoil	Type B2 iron knife. Curve-backed and rectangular-section tang attached to top of blade. The remaining cutting edge is straight.	Blade: 44 x 19 x 4 Tang: 10 x 5 x 4
n/a	560	Topsoil	Tapered iron socket with a rectangular extension, possibly a gouge. Three-sided socket with a rectangular section.	81 x 20 x 15 x 5
n/a	560	Topsoil	Part of a square-sectioned and tapered iron socket or ferrule with a single perforation.	45 x 8-15 x 3
n/a	560	Topsoil	Fragment of a curved flat band of iron with small rivet (5mm diam.).	26 x 20 x 3
n/a	560	Topsoil	Large iron bolt with square nut. The head of the bolt appears to be hexagonal. The shaft of the bolt has a rounded section.	Bolt: 114 x 9-11 Head: 20 x 20 x10 Nut: 24 x 24 x12
n/a	560	Topsoil	Round-sectioned iron rod	54 x 7 x 7

n/a	560	Topsoil	Round-sectioned tapered probable nail shank	53 x 2-6 x 2x6
n/a	560	Topsoil	Badly corroded possible nail shank.	25 x 11 x 9
n/a	560	Topsoil	Badly corroded possible nail shank.	23 x 11 x 9
n/a	560	Topsoil	Flat, rectangular piece of iron with square terminus. Type of nail?	15 x 6 x 5
n/a	560	Topsoil	Small, roundish piece of iron.	11 x 8 x 6
688	687	Pit	Short strip of iron with rectangular section. One end has a possible perforation while a protrusion on the end could be a nail head. Distance between 'perforation' and 'nail head': 25mm.	36 x 14 x 6
5132	5131	Ditch	Blade tip, likely straight-backed (Type D).	30 x 11 x 7
5137	5031	Ditch	Irregular-shaped, slightly curved flat piece of iron. Function unknown.	33 x 24 x 3
5150	5162	Ditch	Iron fragment with triangular section, probably a blade fragment.	26 x 11 x 2-5
5150	5163	Ditch	Ellipse-shaped iron ring with square section.	Ring: 33 x 29 Section: 4 x 4
5170	5171	Non-archaeological	Iron nail with a curved flat head and shank with rectangular section.	Head: 13 x 11 x 3 Shank: 37 x 5-6 x 3-4
6000	6013	Ditch	Elongated piece of iron with rectangular section. One end has a badly corroded bulge and the other end is curved. Likely a nail.	42 x 5 x 3

6000	6027	Ditch	Broadly square, flat and thin fragment of iron. Unclear if the edges are original or fractured. Function unknown.	15 x 15 x 3
6000	6027	Ditch	Type D1 iron knife. Straight-backed. The remaining blade shape is elongated triangular. The tang is badly worn but was most likely centrally placed on the blade.	Blade: 78 x 16 x 4 Tang: 11 x 6 x 5
6000	6027	Ditch	Type B2 iron knife. Curve-backed. The remaining cutting edge is straight. The elongated tang is attached at the top of the blade.	Blade: 54 x 12 x 4 Tang: 24 x 5 x 3
6000	6028	Ditch	Badly corroded flat rectangular piece of iron. Function unknown.	32 x 24 x 7
6000	6028	Ditch	Small curved flat and badly corroded piece of iron. Possibly a fragment of the above.	16 x 11 x 4
6000	6032	Ditch	Four rectangular iron strip fragments with circular perforations. Rectangular section. Distance between perforations: 24, 25 and 26mm. One piece is narrower than the other three. A type of fitting.	a) 62 x 10-11 x 3 b) 51 x 8-10 x 3 c) 13 x 10 x 2 d) 20 x 8-9 x 3
6000	6032	Ditch	Badly corroded pointed length of iron. Rectangular section. Possibly a nail shank.	17 x 4-7 x 3-4
6000	6045	Ditch	Badly corroded iron seemingly consisting of two flat pieces of iron oxidized into one piece. Might be knife blade fragments.	22 x 16 x 12
6000	6057	Ditch	Rectangular-sectioned length of iron with a curved end. Probably a nail shank.	30 x 5 x 4

6094	6021	Furrow	Irregularly fragmented iron object. At least one, possibly three original surfaces survive. Function unknown.	28 x 23 x 19
6094	6021	Furrow	Type B iron knife. Curve-backed. The cutting edge is badly preserved and no tang can be distinguished.	62 x 10 x 2