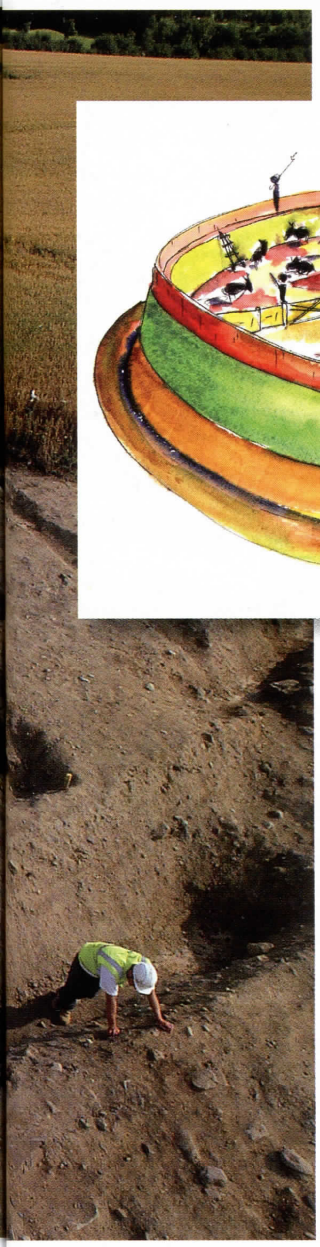
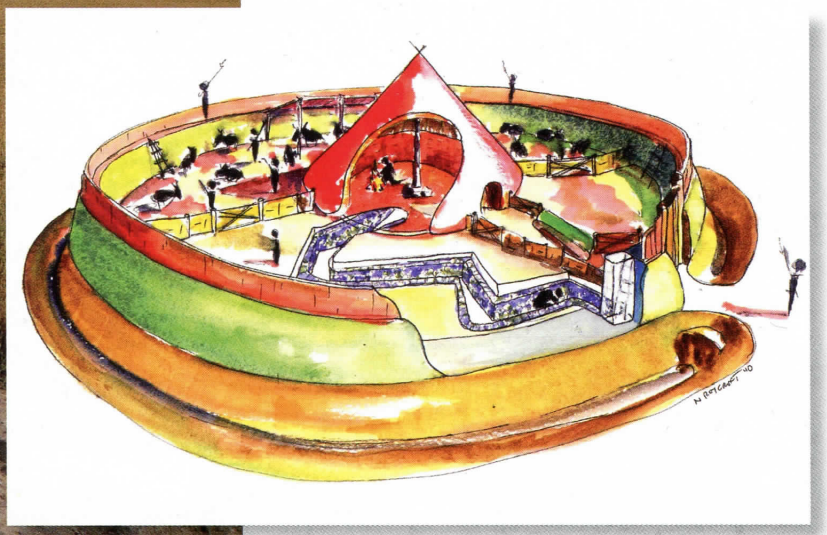
Escaping the Vikings

Souterrains in County Louth, Ireland

Secret underground passages – three words that conjure memories of childhood reading, of the *Arabian Nights* and the Famous Five. Most secret passages are the stuff of Gothic novels, ghost stories, and local fairy tales, but recent road-building work in Ireland revealed real ones. National Roads Authority archaeologist Niall Roycroft tells us what 'souterrains' were used for, and why County Louth has so many.

Souterrains are the 'underground castles' of early Medieval Ireland. These subterranean strongholds and escape tunnels are not unique to Ireland. In Cornwall, for example, they are known as *fogou*, or 'fuggy-holes', from the Celtic **ifócw*, meaning 'cave'. The use of the French-derived term 'souterrain' (from *sous terrain*, 'under ground') in academic literature reflects the fact that this type of underground structure was once thought to be an exclusively Gaulish and Iron Age phenomenon. Now known to be much longer-lived, souterrains are found all the way up the Atlantic coast of Europe. Those in Ireland date from the 9th to 11th centuries AD, and are closely associated with the ringforts (enclosed farmsteads) of the early Medieval period.





ABOVE In Medieval Ireland, 'souterrain' tunnels could save your life if your ringfort was attacked. Here the Carn More ringfort and souterrain are under excavation. A reconstruction (INSET) of the house, souterrain, and enclosure bank, based on excavated evidence and provided by Shane Delaney of Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd, reveals the relationship between these elements.

The road-building work that has taken place over the last decade along the route of the M1 and A1/N1 in North Louth (the area around the county town of Dundalk, roughly equidistant from Dublin and Belfast) has provided an exceptional opportunity to find out more about such souterrains. The upgrading of motorway and trunk roads has allowed for the meticulous dissection and recording of five large souterrains, one smaller example, and four ringforts.

This is only a small proportion of what we believe might survive in the area. North Louth has an approximate area of 225 km^2 (not counting the high Carlingford mountains). If the number of souterrains found on this stretch of the M1 were to be extrapolated across Dundalk and the surrounding plains, a potential souterrain density of one per 35-40 hectares is implied. The *Archaeological Survey of County Louth* (Buckley and Sweetman 1991) lists some 300 ringforts, earthworks, and enclosures, and around 290 known or possible souterrains, but the true number could run to as many as 600 in this souterrain-rich county.

Viking settlers

To understand why souterrains became so popular we need to look at Viking settlement in Ireland. From AD 400 to 795, Ireland underwent an extraordinary development boom in terms of wealth and culture. But following the arrival of the Vikings in AD 795, until the end of their cataclysmic first wave of raids around AD 850, were 55 years of crash and crisis. This led to a century of uneasy peace during which the Vikings (generally) turned from raiding to trade and settlement. It was against this backdrop that Ireland's longphorts – settlements with facilities for sea-going ships to dock and take on or unload cargo – were established. Ultimately, these evolved into the first Irish towns and trading settlements.

The reasoning behind Viking longphort, town, and encampment locations is becoming steadily clearer. The Vikings liked rivers because of the shelter they afforded – and especially tidal rivers that provided fast access to the open sea and were navigable by shallow-draught vessels, even at low tide. The distribution of Viking camps and settlements also clearly shows that they homed in on the chinks in Ireland's security armour. They did not settle in the heartlands of established Gaelic territories, where they would first have to overthrow local kings and hostile populations. Instead they consistently based themselves on the boundaries between Gaelic territories, exploiting these relatively underdeveloped marginal areas. Subject to endemic cross-border raiding, they were ripe for annexation.

Along the east coast, the Vikings could not overthrow the long-established power centres of Dundalk (North Louth) or Knowth–Slane (Boyne Valley), but they did target the River Dee–Glyde estuary (Annagassan) in the area between the tribal kingdoms of Connaille Mhuirthemne (Ulaid, North Louth) and Brega (Southern O'Neill, now South Louth and Meath). As is well known, the Vikings also targeted the River Liffey (Dublin), which formed the boundary between Brega and Uí Dúnlainge (Laigan, Kildare, and Wicklow). They also established towns at Waterford, on the boundary between Laigan and Munster; at Limerick, between Munster and Connaught; and at Cork, between the powerful Munster–Cashel and the weaker Eoganacht territories of West Cork–Kerry.

The inhabitants of North Louth (then the kingdom of Connaille Mhuirthemne) must have felt quite vulnerable during the 9th and 10th centuries, with four significant Viking settlements only a few hours away by sea, including Annagassan, Dublin, Carlingford, and Strangford Lough. Their response to this clear and present danger was to build souterrains.

Souterrain form and function

The North Louth M1 souterrains fall into two clear types: the 'double-entrance' souterrain and the 'single-entrance' type. Determining whether these two types are contemporary, or if one

ABOVE A map of the Dundalk area, showing the location of souterrains excavated as part of the M1 Dundalk Western Bypass route and the A1/N1 Newry–Dundalk Link. The map is based on the Ordnance Survey Ireland Discovery Series.

develops from the other, gives a fascinating glimpse into their function.

Double-entrance souterrains were characteristically located inside a ringfort. This is probably the key to their function. With their field-stone construction, lack of security features, and simple form, it could be argued that double-entrance souterrains are an initial crisis-response to the early Viking raids. Easy to build and simple to use, they provide an escape passage running from inside the main ringfort house to the enclosure bank. A souterrain excavated at Carn More 1, Co. Louth, was 20m long and zigzagged from the ringfort centre to the bank.

Using this souterrain, we can visualise a Viking raid. The boat lands in Dundalk Bay; the Vikings leap out and disperse in small groups across the landscape. Despite its name, a ringfort is not designed to keep people out – its main function was keeping livestock in – and the gate is an obvious weak point. A small number of Vikings, perhaps eight or nine, storm in and attack the main house, setting fire to the thatch. Anyone inside the house is trapped and will be captured – or they would be, if the souterrain did not provide a means of escape. With the thatch on fire and the raiders rounding up frightened livestock, there is time to burst out of the souterrain through the top of the ringfort bank, possibly screened by a hedge, and flee.

A second souterrain, designed for a similar function, was found at Faughart Lower 10, on the A1/N1 Newry–Dundalk Link Road. This example was partly hidden inside the inner enclosure bank, and led to a well-preserved section of stone wall. There might well have been a block or two in this wall designed to be pushed out so that escapees would not need to climb out on top of the wall, and could thus avoid being seen.

Such scenarios are based on the assumption that the escape route remains undetected. The problem with the double-ended souterrain was that once the two ends were found and blocked, it was fairly easy to discover the middle zone, dig down and flush out anybody inside. Contemporary documents record that this did happen, and that people were killed after having been found hiding in 'their caves' or by being deliberately smothered within them.

The classic single-entrance souterrains for which North Louth is famous perhaps developed as a response to this weakness. These extraordinary and highly refined 'underground castles' represent a fantastic achievement of Irish early Medieval society. With only one entrance it was very difficult for a raider to predict from

IMAGE: www.regia.org

RIGHT Face to face with the threat. This member of re-enactment group *Regia Anglorum* (see p.50) is wearing a historically authentic reconstruction of 9th-century Viking equipment. Such fearsome raiders, who regularly targeted the region for plunder between the late 8th and mid 10th centuries, would have been an all too familiar sight for the builders of the Louth souterrains.

the outside where the passages were going and, as they were equipped with internal security features, even if the souterrain entrance was breached, the inside could still be defended.

Those excavated on the M1, at Newtownbalregan 6 (45m long) and Tateetra 1 (70m long) were placed outside any associated enclosure; not only are they too big to fit into an enclosed settlement, but nobody would want to build such a complicated structure – with a probable construction duration of several months – in the middle of a working farm. A souterrain outside the ringfort would also be accessible to those living in the wider community.

ABOVE The souterrain at Faughart Lower 10 (LEFT) terminates inside the 'cashel wall', while Tateetra 1 (RIGHT) was not built within an enclosure.

The 'refuge' souterrain's three zones

As well as being a means of refuge or escape, souterrains would have made excellent store-cellars, because of their constant temperature and humidity. Good areas for storage were noted in the Newtownbalregan example, just inside the entrance. The Newtownbalregan entrance had a second function as a smoking house. Externally, a large, timber-lined smoke-box fed into the entrance chamber, and an extensive accumulation of charred debris in the souterrain showed considerable use. Tateetra's main entrance was approached by a large ramp down, and the door could be barred internally with back-bracing timbers slotting into the souterrain walls. While the central entrance room had two galleries leading off it, it would have made a fine store room as well.

Even with such a stout outer door, however, it would be reckless to store anything too valuable in there without mounting a round-the-clock guard. Just outside the Newtownbalregan inner security door was a recess with a large step that apparently connected with the surface. This 'second entrance' could have been for emergencies when the main entrance was being used as a smoke-house. It is also reminiscent of the 'chutes' used for posting dogs down into animal-baiting pits. The word 'terrier' roughly translates as 'earth-dog', and these animals have no difficulty chasing prey underground. Shutting a stout terrier guard dog or two into a souterrain would provide security at night and, in a crisis, a volley of vicious barks in the dark or from behind a closed door would certainly put off any attackers who had managed to find the souterrain entrance.

Beyond the storage area, the security zone is where the main defence of the souterrain would have occurred – well inside the structure, to frustrate anyone firing arrows into the entrance.

BELOW Recording a 'beehive' chamber and claustrophobic escape passage.

ABOVE The internal door at Newtownbalregan showing the large projecting stone door jamb (against the ranging rod, right), the post hole for the swivelling door (centre), and slots (left) in the stonework for bracing timbers to hold the door in place.

The obvious way to deal with people who have gone to ground is to smoke them out. This would not have worked at Tateetra or Newtownbalregan, as both had stout internal doors at the entrance to the security zones. The doors could be secured using double back-braces, slotting into the souterrain walls, with the door itself wedged against large, projecting stone door jambs. The doors were either lifted into place (as at Tateetra) or swung on a post (as at Newtownbalregan).

Behind these doors the souterrains were supplied with fresh air drawn into the structure from vents in the lower levels. The security zone has curving or zigzag passages, again to frustrate arrows or spears, and the tightness of the tunnel means that the advantage is with those retreating into the structure, because anyone killed or injured forms a block to the advancing group. At both Newtownbalregan and Tateetra the security zone ended in a corbelled chamber containing a drop-hole creep. The creep was so tight that only one person could squeeze through at a time, and if they were killed they would have blocked the drop-hole completely. Other items could also be used to stop up these drop-holes. A large, flat stone slab at Tateetra acted as a trapdoor over the drop-hole creep for day-to-day souterrain use.

If the security zone was breached, the last stand would take place in the end zone. This area appears to have been deliberately proportioned to accommodate large numbers of people. Both Newtownbalregan and Tateetra had a 15m-long end zone terminating in a chamber with approximately 14m^2 of floor space – quite enough for many adults and children to spend the night in reasonable comfort. The second gallery at Tateetra (gallery 4) was even more capacious, with an end gallery 18.5m long and 1.6-1.7m high, with a floor area of 33m^2. This gated gallery was approached by an internal ramp (gallery 3), and could easily have accommodated a reasonably sized herd of animals.

LEFT The main entrance to the Newtownbalregan souterrain (top left of the picture). In the centre is the second possible entrance. The air intake shaft (BELOW) supplies air to the central 'security zone' between the entrance/storage area and the end zone.

Air, drainage, and lighting

In order to keep a souterrain fresh inside it was essential that it had an air-circulation system. The best way to achieve this was to place the souterrain on a slope with the entrance above the level of the base. This meant that air could be drawn into the structure through dedicated shafts at the lower levels and passed out of the main door. Newtownbalregan even seems to have had a form of grille at the entrance to facilitate the process.

But if souterrains slope down from their entrances, they have a problem with water flowing in. The Newtownbalregan end zone had flooded when it was discovered, and Tateetra had a series of sumps dug into the floors. Water-management features were noted immediately before the entrance to the first beehive chamber in both souterrains.

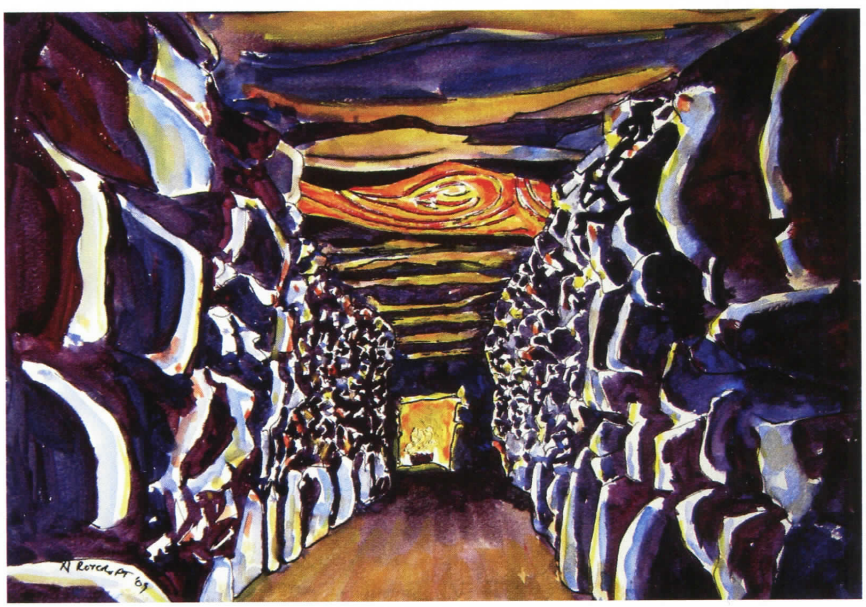
The discovery of a Souterrain Ware vessel at Tateetra suggests that this handmade domestic pottery, so-named because it is often found in souterrains, was commonly used for lamps. Even a broken pot can be so employed if the base is intact. The Tateetra 'lamp' was placed in a corner next to a step at the entrance to the chamber that contains the drop-hole creep.

It is generally accepted that smaller niches built into the walls of souterrains are intended for lamps, but some niches are far too large to be simply 'for lighting' (even allowing for numerous lamps with weak flames). A large alcove in the middle of the Newtownbalregan security zone was clearly designed for storing something. It had a lipped entrance to stop water draining in, so whatever it was needed to be kept dry. Perhaps spare lamps were stored here. A similarly large alcove was found at Tateetra, this time in the middle of the end zone.

As well as this practical function, the large Newtownbalregan alcove may have had another role. In addition to storage, it may occasionally have been filled with lamps designed to throw

ABOVE The souterrain at Newtownbalregan under excavation.

RIGHT A reconstruction of the large alcove at Newtownbalregan, used as a source of illumination for the megalithic art panel incorporated into the gallery ceiling (BELOW).



a light down the gallery to illuminate a highly decorated and reused panel of megalithic art – deliberately placed and angled to be seen from the large chamber immediately behind the inner security door. The formal location and lighting of this panel hints at a ritual function for souterrains: they could have formed part of a coming-of-age or similar life-passage ritual.

Anyone who has spent some time alone in a dark and silent souterrain will know it is a moving and memorable experience. It is believed that prehistoric people used the deepest parts of caves for transcendental experiences, and most societies have a coming-of-age ritual for children.

ABOVE Cramped conditions – but the narrow spaces in souterrains like those at Newtownbalregan would have provided a perfect hiding place for treasured possessions.

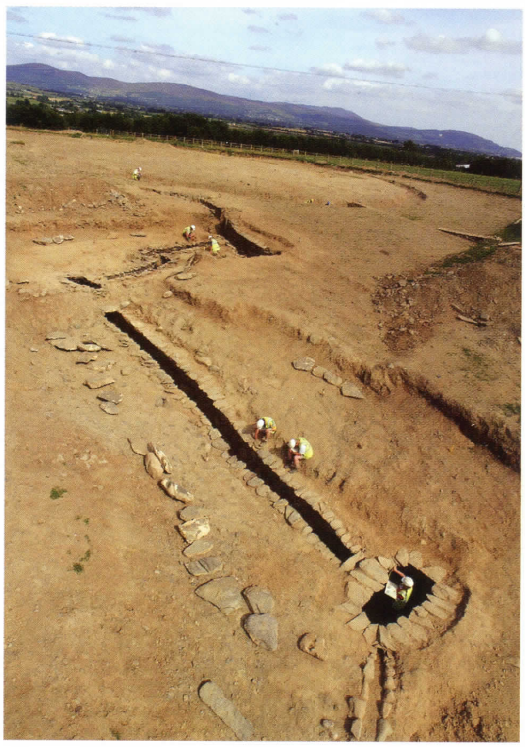
BELOW & RIGHT The ringfort and external souterrain at Newtownbalregan 6.

Normally during the early Medieval period, this would take the form of adolescent baptism in Ireland, but Christian practices have long co-existed here with earlier rites. A 'child' may well have been put into the back of a souterrain for a day or night, to emerge as an 'adult'.

Other decorated panels were simply used as building material, including an early Medieval altar inscribed with five Greek crosses and a boundary marker inscribed with a Latin cross at Tateetra. Some building material at Tateetra probably came from a prehistoric complex at Balregan 1, literally a stone's throw from the site over the Castletown River. Balregan was the site of a Neolithic henge, and evidence from a similar site at Carn Beg shows that such features probably contained several concentric circles of standing stones. If so, many of the smaller Balregan henge stones (all weathered examples of various rock types) appear to have been brought to Tateetra and split into slices to be used as capstones. This practice might explain why there are so few stone circles and other megalithic monuments surviving in lowland County Louth: the stones may have all been used to construct souterrains.

Hiding places

A souterrain is an obvious place to hide valuable items. Such items could not be left where a burglar could easily find them, and a particular



After the Vikings had turned to trading, the Irish continued to raid cattle, loot crops, ransom hostages, and capture slaves.

stone at Tateetra showed clear evidence, in the form of a hole dug underneath it, of being a locator for a hidden cache. Unfortunately, the cache had been emptied by the time of the M1 works, so we have no idea what items were once buried here.

At Faughart Lower, a *c.*10th century AD iron plough and coulter were recovered, hidden in the floor. This souterrain, being constructed across earlier, backfilled enclosure ditches, was subject to subsidence. After a period of repairs and strengthening, the whole souterrain was deliberately backfilled with earth and stones. This was probably when the site ceased to be used as a settlement with an attached graveyard, and became wholly used as a cemetery, perhaps in the later 9th or early 10th century. Prominent at the top of this backfill was a large granite rotary quern-stone. The deliberate placing of quern-stones in 'closure' deposits on ringforts is becoming increasingly recognised, as at Killeisk, Co. Tipperary, excavated on the N7 Castletown–Nenagh road scheme. Other finds from Faughart Lower included a silver ingot (the currency of the Vikings), an ingot casting mould, and a Northern European-style strike-a-light – all apparently showing the influence of Viking lifestyle.

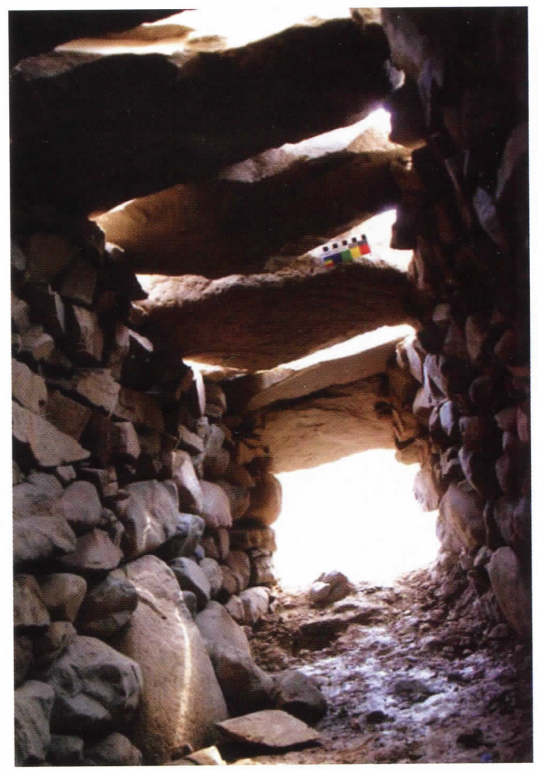
Endgame

The radiocarbon dates for the construction of Newtownbalregan and Tateetra both fall within the AD 800-1000 range, and it is very tempting to link the construction and use of souterrains to the Viking period. It is certainly the case that we find the largest numbers in those areas of Ireland, like the north of County Louth, that were subject to prolonged Viking attack, and it is during this period that the souterrain appears to have achieved the highest degree of development in Ireland. But the Vikings cannot be blamed for everything: even if they were a catalyst to the development of the souterrain, these structures continued to play an important role in protecting goods and family in the turmoil of the 9th to 11th centuries. After the Vikings had stopped raiding and turned to trading, the Irish continued to attack each other, in an era of cattle-raiding, crop-looting, hostage-ransoming and full-blown slaving.

Between AD 921 and 928, the Irish forced the Vikings out of both Annagassan and Carlingford. But the battered people of North Louth could not breathe a sigh of relief, because as soon as the Viking instability ceased, there was a series of battles between the Connaille and their neighbours, the Airghialla of Counties Monaghan–Armagh. At least 16 battles or incursions involving these groups are listed in the Annals between AD 910 and 1107, in which nine 'lords of Connaille' and two 'lords of Airghialla' were slain in battle. Souterrains would have remained a valuable asset throughout this strife, and perhaps were still constructed. They certainly continued to be used, as evidenced by radiocarbon dating results and a late 11th- to mid 13th-century bronze stick-pin from Tateetra. By the early to mid 12th century, North Louth was finally absorbed into the Airghialla federation and peace broke out – until the arrival of the Anglo-Normans a few short decades later.

FURTHER READING

Sheelagh Conran, Ed Danaher, and Michael Stanley (eds) *Past Times, Changing Fortunes*, Archaeology and the National Roads Authority Monograph Series 8, ISBN 9780956418050.



RIGHT Light at the end of the tunnel – the souterrain passage at Newtownbalregan.

SOURCE

Faughart Lower 10: **Peter Bowen**, Archaeological Development Services Ltd. *Carn More 1:* **Shane Delaney**, Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd. *Newtownbalregan 6:* **David Bayley**, Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd. *Tateetra 1:* **Avril Hayes**, Aegis Archaeology Ltd.