

N59 Realignment at Derrylea, near Clifden, Co. Galway

**An archaeological final report on
a test excavation of
a sub-circular bank at Derrylea, near Clifden, Co. Galway**

**for Roads and Transportation Unit,
Galway County Council**

Licence No: 05E0977

**Graham Hull
TVAS Ireland Ltd**

Job J05/19

5th December 2005

Summary

Site name: N59 Realignment, Derrylea, near Clifden, Co. Galway

Townland: Derrylea

Parish: Moyrus

Barony: Ballynahinch

County: Galway

Planning Ref. No: CPO (Part 8 Planning & Development Act 2000), Galway Co. Co. No. 21

Client: Roads and Transportation Unit, Galway County Council

Landowner: Peter MacDonagh, Derrylea, Co. Galway

Grid reference: 071145 249626 (OSI 6", Co. Galway, Sheet 36)

Naturally occurring geology: Blanket peat overlying gravely glacial till

TVAS Ireland Job No: J05/19

Licence No: 05E0977

Licence Holder: Graham Hull

Report author: Graham Hull

Site activity: Test trenching

Date of fieldwork: 20th and 21st August 2005

Date of report: 5th December 2005

Summary of results: A single hand-dug test trench was excavated across a sub-circular bank in advance of a proposed road development. The turf bank had maximum dimensions of approximately 1.5m wide by 0.5m high and the feature had a diameter of approximately 6m. An entrance was noted at the eastern side. The bank was built directly onto topsoil. A radiocarbon date from reeds buried beneath the bank indicates that the bank was constructed after AD 1220. The feature could be a shelter for seasonal herding.

Monuments identified: Sub-circular turf bank

Location and reference of archive: The primary records (written, drawn and photographic) are currently held at TVAS Ireland Ltd, Ahish, Ballinruan, Crusheen, Co. Clare.

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Final archaeological report on a test excavation of a sub-circular bank

by Graham Hull

Report J05/19b

Introduction

This report documents the final results of an archaeological test excavation at Derrylea, near Clifden, Co. Galway (NGR 071145 249626) (Fig. 1).

The following Government publications set out many of the procedures relating to planning/development and archaeology:

Framework and Principles for the Protection of the Archaeological Heritage (DAHGI 1999a)

Policy and Guidelines on Archaeological Excavation (DAHGI 1999b)

Archaeology and Development: Guidelines for Good Practice for Developers (ICOMOS 2000)

Review of Archaeological Assessment and Monitoring Procedures in Ireland (Lambrick and Doyle 2000)

A summary of the findings of the test trenching will be submitted to *Excavations 2005*.

The development and planning background

Galway County Council proposes to realign a sector of the N59 national secondary road where it skirts the northern shore of Derrylea lake, roughly 5 km east of Clifden, in Connemara.

The N59 national secondary road is the coastal route between Galway and Sligo, via Clifden, Westport and Ballina. The present scheme proposes to realign a sector of that route about 5 km east of Clifden, where it skirts the north shore of Derrylea lake and the smaller, neighbouring Loughanemlagh. The total length of the new sector will be 3.8 km and it lies between NGR 069453 249777 and NGR 073042 249272. The aim of the work is to improve road safety and shorten journey times by achieving higher design standards in the new or realigned section. Some of the improvements will follow the line of the existing road but about half of the work will involve realignment.

An assessment, by means of desk-based research and a walkover survey, of the architectural and archaeological heritage of the area to be impacted by the proposed road works was undertaken by Jerry O'Sullivan, archaeologist with the National Road Design Office (NRDO), Galway (O'Sullivan 2005). Information from that report has been freely used in this report.

The assessment identified a 5m diameter, sub-circular structure in the townland of Derrylea (Moyrus parish, Ballynahinch barony). This structure is the subject of the present report.

The test trenching was commissioned by Feidhlim McGillicuddy, Roads and Transportation Unit, Galway County Council, on advice from Jerry O'Sullivan NRDO Galway.

Location, topography and geology

The survey area was a long, narrow corridor that lies more or less along the existing N59 road (O'Sullivan 2005). It is strongly defined in landscape terms. To the north is a steep, rocky ridge, rising to 164 m OD. (Beyond the ridge and out of view of the survey area is the valley of the Owenaglin River). To the south are extensive tracts of low-lying peat bog interspersed with numerous lakes, lakelets and smaller bog pools. The largest of these is Derrylea lake but the survey area also borders the smaller Loughanemlagh (alias Loughanarow).

The two landscape zones described above – divided by the existing N59 and thus by the long narrow corridor of the survey area – correspond with two distinct geological zones, both of the Dalradian Age Bennabeola Succession (GSI 2002). To the south, marbles, schists, grits and metavolcanic rocks of the Lakes Marble formation underlie blanket peat. To the north, the steeply rising ground is formed by psammitic pelteic and semi-pelteic schists, forming a mosaic of rock outcrops, pockets of blanket peat, and areas of improved pasture or arable ground, all on stony, till-derived mineral soils.

The archaeological test area (Fig. 2) is to the north side of the existing N59 road and is sheltered on the east by a steep rock face but on the west has an open prospect over Derrylea Lake. On that side there is a large borrow-pit or gravel quarry by the roadside. The site is generally very wet and water was streaming through the structure at the time of test trenching.

Blanket peat overlying gravely glacial till was observed in the test trench.

The approximate level of the potential archaeological feature was 32m above Ordnance Datum.

Archaeological and historical background

The structure identified in O'Sullivan's assessment is a low sub-circular or D-shaped earthen bank forming an enclosure with an overall diameter of about 5m. A few large stones protrude and this was thought to indicate that the structure may have a rubble or masonry wall core (O'Sullivan 2005). The interior was very poorly drained and rushes growing there indicate that this was not a temporary condition.

On the evidence of visual inspection alone it was not possible to say with confidence whether this was a dwelling, or a shepherd's bothy or 'shieling hut', or merely a lambing pen. However, it should be noted that a similar structure was excavated by Michael Gibbons on an upland site in neighbouring Lettershea townland and proved to be a round-house of probable prehistoric date. The dating evidence at that site is from both radiometric and artefactual evidence. Several pieces of worked flint and chert were found, including a thumbnail scraper of probable Late Neolithic or Early Bronze Age date. A sample from the overlying peat produced a radiocarbon date in the mid first millennium BC (Gibbons 1994 and pers comm. with O'Sullivan), in effect a terminus ante quem for the construction and occupation of that building.

Test trenching – Objectives and Methodology

Test excavation took place at the enclosure identified in the assessment in order to establish the nature, extent and, if possible, date of archaeological deposits and features. It was not proposed that such features or deposits be fully investigated (see PGAE 1999).

A licence to excavate was granted to Graham Hull by the National Monuments Section of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government, in consultation with the National Museum of Ireland, on behalf of the Minister for the Environment, Heritage and Local Government. The licence number is 05E0977.

The National Monuments Acts 1930-2004 provide the legislative framework within which archaeological excavation can take place.

Long reeds and ferns partially obscured the potential archaeological feature. These were removed or pressed flat and a detailed topographic survey (i.e. an annotated plan and sectional profile) centred on the feature described above was made. A hand-dug trial trench of 5m by 1m, from the exterior, through the bank and into part of the interior was then excavated.

The spoil was visually scanned for finds.

The test trench was partly back-filled, but as lots of running water was pouring through the trench it was thought to be more dangerous to backfill a chest-high slot with liquid mud than to leave the trench open. The landowner was informed of this decision and concurred that the open trench was less of a hazard to people and animals.

A full written, drawn and photographic record has been made in accordance with the TVAS (Ireland) Ltd Recording Manual (First Edition). Copies of this manual have previously been submitted to the National Monuments Section and the National Museum of Ireland.

The fieldwork was directed by Graham Hull and assisted by Kate Taylor and took place on 20th and 21st August 2005. The weather on the first day was dry and sunny and was very wet on the second day.

Test trenching - Results (Figs 3 and 4 and Plates 1 to 4)

A topographic survey and annotated plan of the sub-circular enclosure was made using a dumpy level and grid (Fig. 3). This survey demonstrated the irregular form of the enclosure but did show the presence of an entrance at the east side. The enclosure bank had maximum dimensions of approximately 1.5m wide by 0.5m high and the feature had a diameter of approximately 6m. The enclosure was constructed on sloping ground and was inclined gently downward from north to south. The presence of a probable stone quarry to the immediate east of the enclosure was noted, and it seems that the structure may have been deliberately sited to shelter against the stone face.

A hand-dug test trench measuring 5m by 1m was excavated across the southern side of the enclosure and allowed examination of the bank construction as well as the internal and external stratigraphy.

Figure 4 should be consulted in conjunction with the following stratigraphic description:

Naturally deposited layers of gravels and silts (57, 54 and 55) were overlain by an old topsoil (53). This old topsoil was typically 0.15m to 0.20m thick and was a dark brown humic soil. Above the old topsoil a thin (0.05m maximum) buried vegetation layer (52) was noted. This organic rich deposit was very dark brown to black in colour and seemingly composed of decayed reeds.

The bank for the enclosure had been constructed on top of the buried vegetation (52) and buried topsoil (53). The bank material (51) was made of organic rich soil and slight colour variations (generally dark brown) indicated that the bank was constructed using sods as building blocks. The bank in the test trench had a maximum height of 0.5m. Occasional cobble-sized pieces of limestone were observed in the bank make-up, but these were certainly not structural.

Above the sod-bank, a modern topsoil (50), 0.20m thick was recorded.

The internal part of the enclosure had probably been stripped of old topsoil and bottomed onto natural gravel (57). Since abandonment, silts (56) and modern topsoil (50) – as well as much water and reeds have colonised the centre of the enclosure.

Finds

No archaeological artefacts were observed or recovered. Several pieces of 19th/20th century pottery, glass and plastic were observed on the modern ground surface but these were not retained. No artefacts were found within or below the bank.

Samples

Small samples of the modern topsoil (50), the bank material (51), the buried vegetation (52) and the buried topsoil (53) were taken. The buried vegetation was given a cursory examination by a palaeoenvironmentalist (Penny Johnston) and this suggested that it is very humic material, but that much of the organic structure has already decayed and that the only macro remains likely come from it, even if sieved and sorted by microscope, will be moss and roots.

Radiocarbon Dating

A sample of the vegetation buried beneath the bank was sent to Beta Analytic, Inc, Miami, Florida

Table 1: Radiocarbon results

Sample material	Context	Lab code	Radiometric age	Calendrical calibrations (Stuiver et al 1998)
Reeds/moss	52	Beta-210097	690±70 BP	2 sigma (95%) Cal AD 1220 to 1410 1 sigma (68%) Cal AD 1270 to 1310 and Cal AD 1360 to 1390

This determination provides a *terminus post quem* and implies that the bank was most probably constructed after AD 1220.

The preservation of old vegetation below the bank in water-logged, and probably anaerobic conditions, might allow the estimate of the date of the bank's construction to be pushed forward by perhaps a hundred years.

Discussion

The topographic survey and test trenching have established that the sub-circular enclosure at Derrylea, Co. Galway is a man-made structure, built of sod and directly on top of the pre-existing vegetation. The enclosure has an entrance at the eastern side and is approximately 6m across and the bank, at its highest, is 0.5m.

The mat of vegetation beneath the structure would not have survived in the observed pristine state over many centuries, even in a wet environment, as the conditions are unlikely to have been fully anaerobic at all times. Therefore, the radiocarbon date of AD 1220-1410 for the vegetation beneath the bank may be reasonably indicative of the date of construction of the structure.

There are however some problems with interpreting the structure as having a potential age of over 700 year. A sod-built structure that is subject to the erosive nature of running water is very unlikely to survive for many centuries. Similarly, the action of cattle on a soft feature would result in its rapid destruction and this also suggests that the enclosure is relatively recent.

It can be stated with confidence that the enclosure is not prehistoric and that the similarities with the probable Neolithic or Early Bronze Age round-house excavated in a neighbouring townland (Gibbons 1994) are superficial. Also, the Lettershea house was built of stone and the Derrylea structure was made from sod.

The question that needs answering is: what was the function of the Derrylea structure?

O'Connor (1998, 95-6) notes a type of vernacular dwelling in the Gaelic controlled West of Ireland in the later medieval period, known as the 'creat'. These structures were small, one-roomed, windowless houses of circular or oval plan that were very simply constructed of post and wattle, covered with sods. A hearth would have been centrally located in the creat. It has been suggested that this dwelling type was associated with seasonal herding and grazing of cattle. The term 'booleying' describes the summer migration of people and cattle to upland, woodland or bogland pastures and was a feature of the Gaelic economy through the medieval period to the seventeenth century.

The Derrylea structure may be an example of such a seasonal shelter but the very wet ground that the building was sited on does not suggest human habitation as there were drier places very nearby to locate a house - even a temporary one for poor herdsman. Perhaps then, the Derrylea structure was built to temporarily house animals in the later medieval or post-medieval period. Sheep require less intensive management than cattle and need only be herded for slaughter, shearing, and lambing. Another interpretation of the Derrylea structure is a shepherd's bothy or 'shieling hut' or perhaps a pen for lambing.

It might also be significant to draw attention to what was not found on the site: charcoal, any sort of food debris, any sort of archaeological artefact, any burnt or heat-shattered stone, any paving or worn or stony surface within the structure, any associated or adjacent visible surface features in the environs.

Recommendations

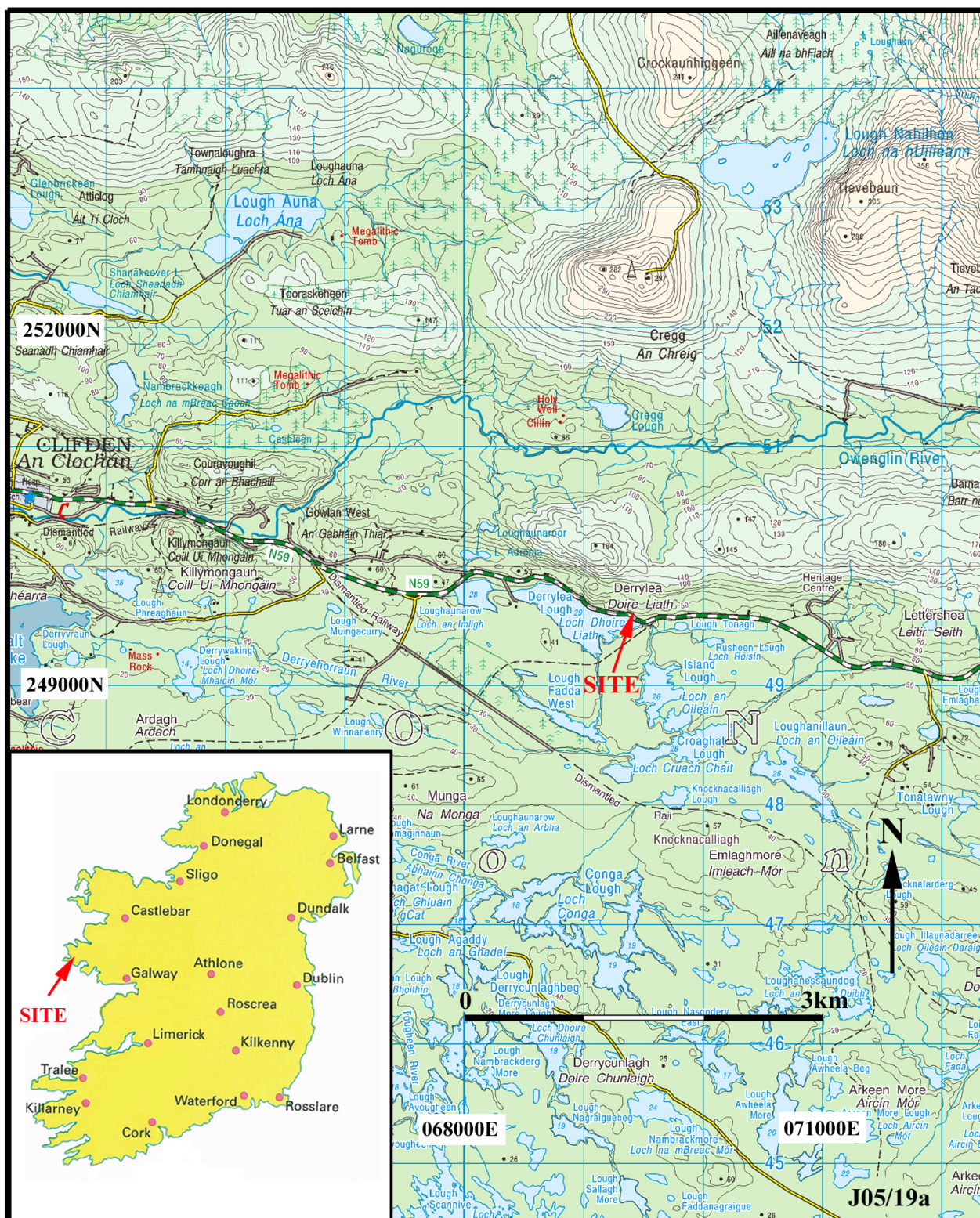
1. Publication of a summary of the work in *Excavations 2005*.
2. Publication of a note on the date and assessment excavation in *Journal of the Galway Archaeological and Historical Society*.
3. No further fieldwork is proposed.

The opinions given in this archaeological final report are made subject to approval by the National Monuments Service and the National Museum of Ireland.

Graham Hull MIFA MIAI
TVAS Ireland Ltd
5th December 2005

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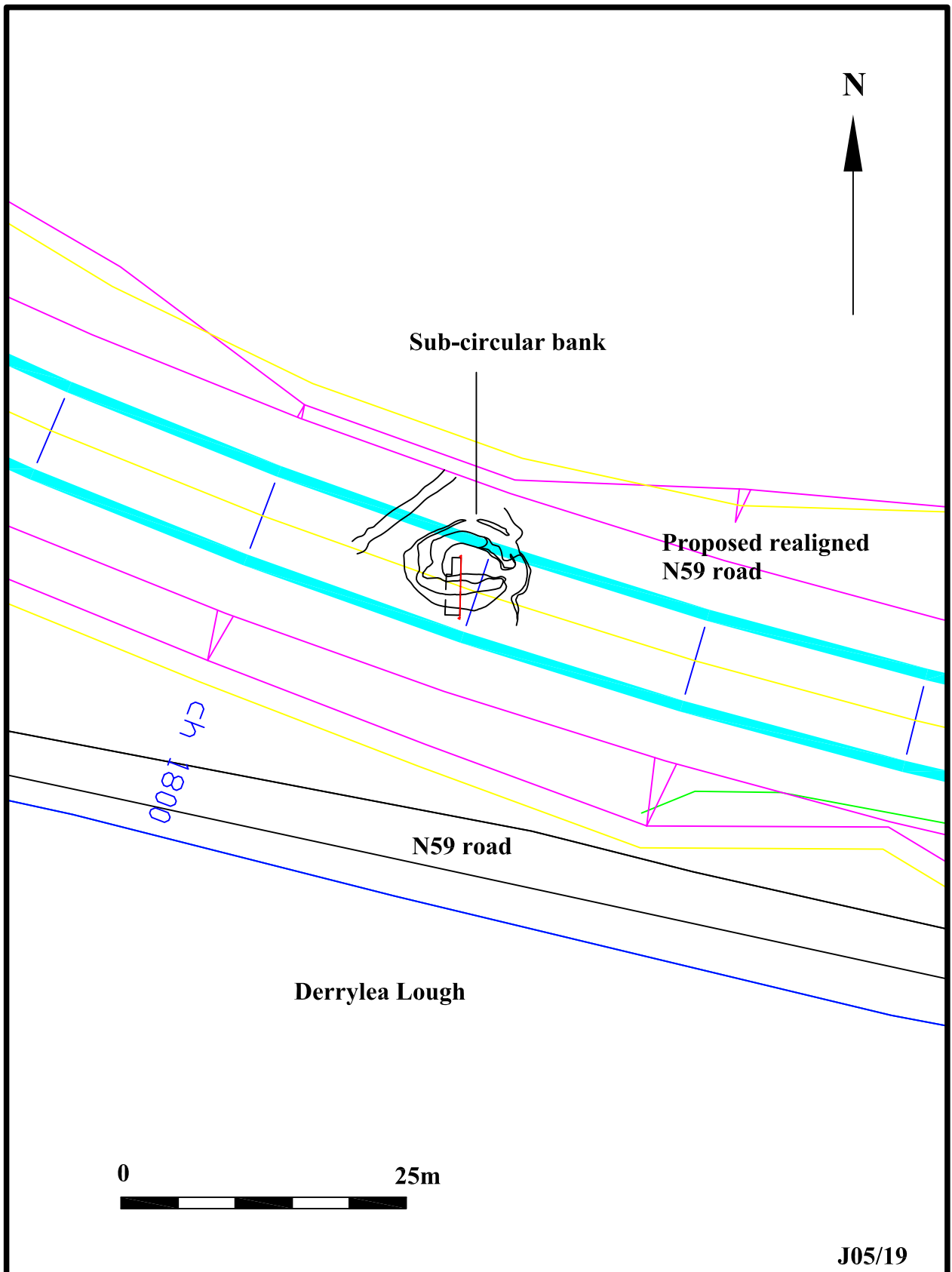


Derrylea, Co. Galway
05E0977

Figure 1: Site location

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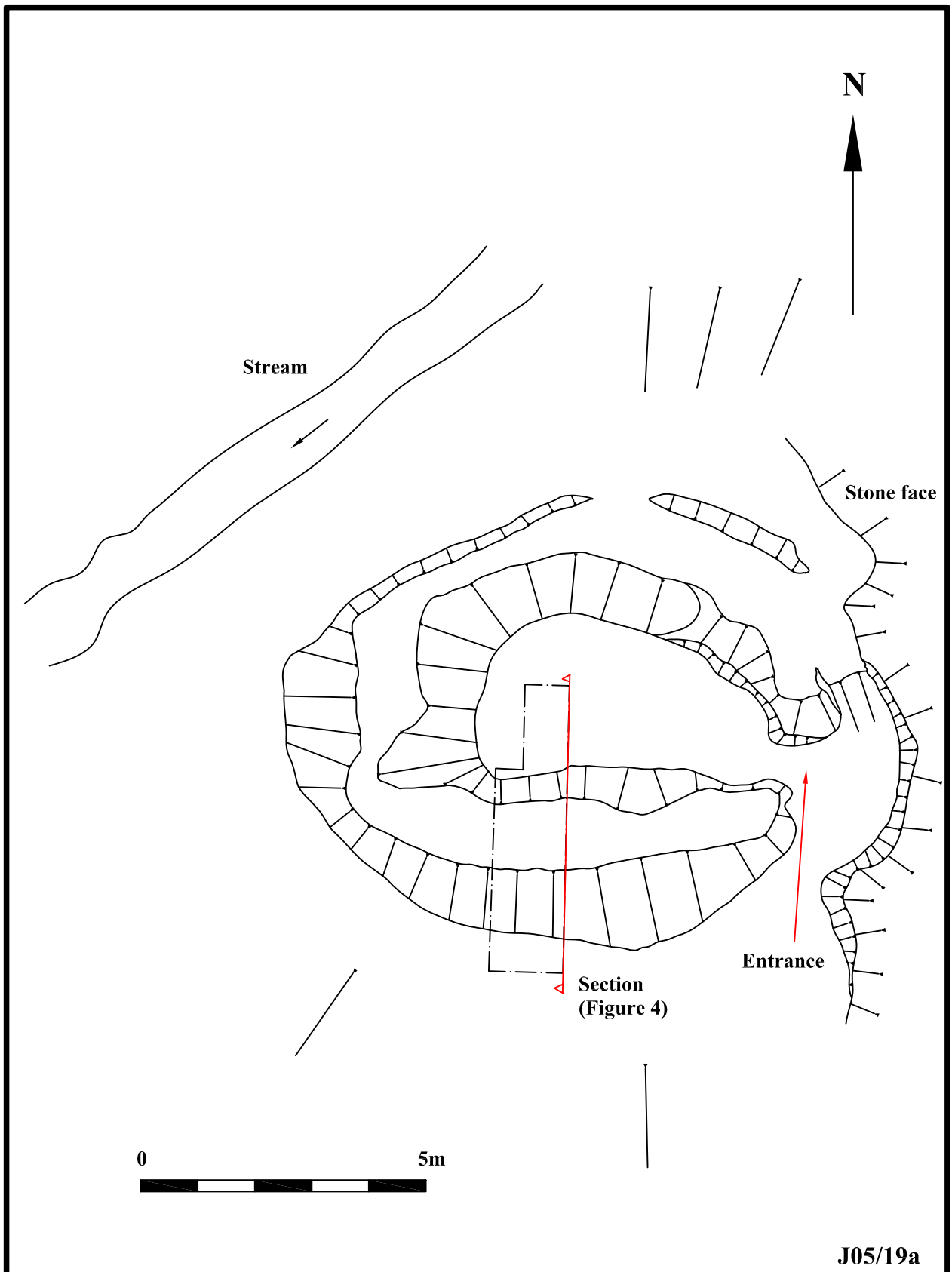
Derrylea, Co. Galway

05E0977

Figure 2: Site location

Scale 1:500
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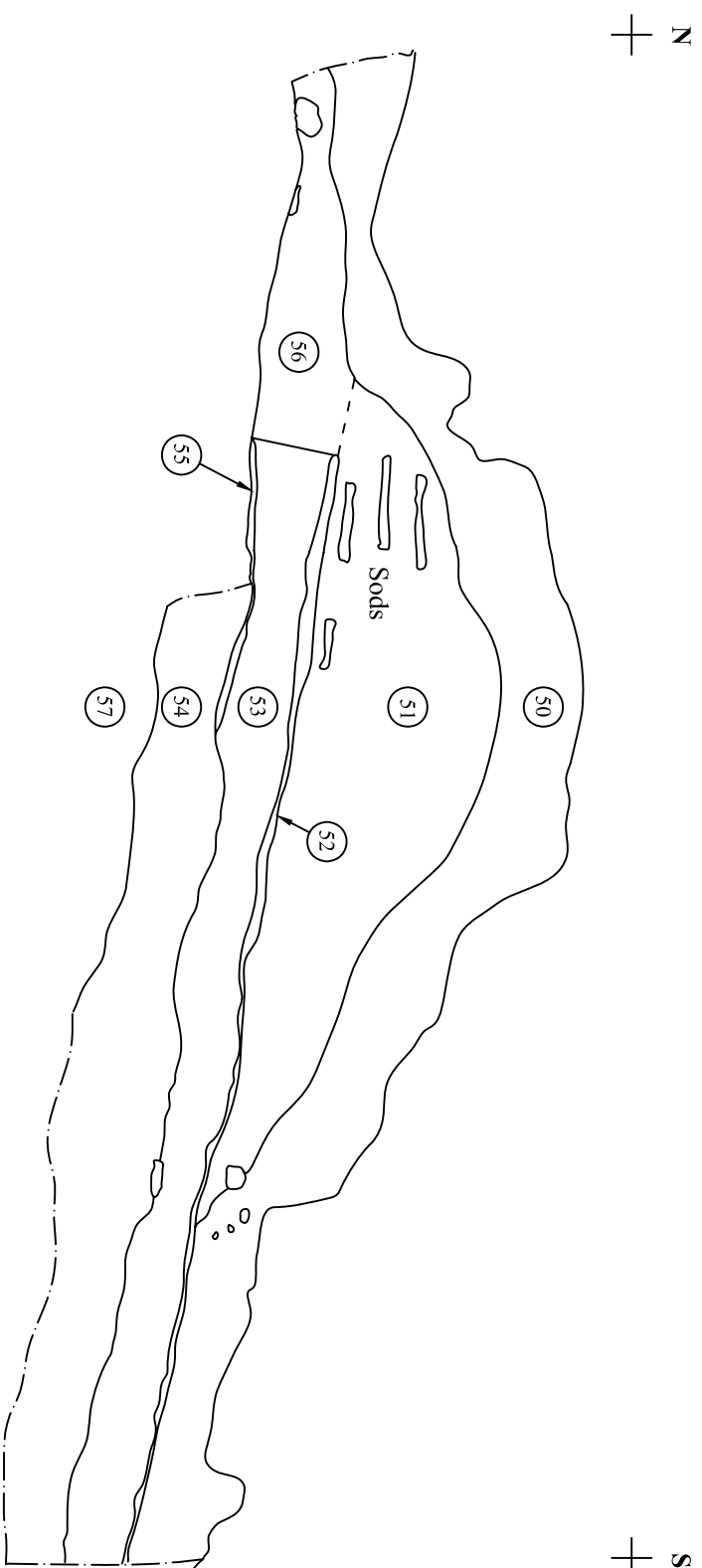
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Figure 3: Plan of enclosure

Scale 1:100

T V A S
I R E L A N D
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Figure 4: Section across enclosure

Scale 1:25

0 1m



Plate 1: Enclosure (centre), N59 road and Derrylea Lough. Looking south



Plate 2: Enclosure with test trench under excavation. Looking south. Scales 1m



Plate 3: Test trench. West facing section



Plate 4: Test trench. West facing section (detail). Scales 1m and 0.3m



Plate 5: Test trench. Looking south. Showing running water