

# Exploring domestic and non-domestic space in an Early Medieval Landscape at Navan Moat, Co. Meath

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## Introduction

Navan Moat is the name given to a dramatic hill to the west of Navan, Co. Meath, in Moathill townland. At the top of the hill is a flat-topped earthen mound which is believed to be the remains of an Anglo Norman Motte, perhaps built by Jocelyn Nangle or his son William at the time of the founding of Navan Town in c. 1172 (Bradley 1985, 94).

More recently, Meath County Council constructed a new road (the Navan Inner Relief Road) linking the Kells and Athboy main roads, and this passes just to the west of Navan Moat. Numerous phases of pre-construction archaeological testing and geophysical survey revealed that the new road would disturb possible archaeological remains where it passed over a high point just at the base of the motte. Attempts were made to alter the line of the proposed road to preserve archaeological features, but it was inevitable that some would require archaeological excavation, and in the Summer of 2006 the sensitive



Figure 1. Photograph of Navan Moat hill.

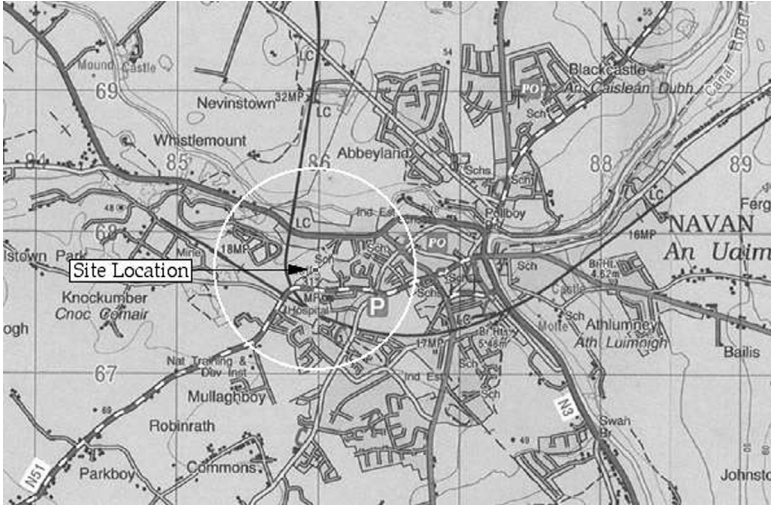


Figure 2. Location of site.

areas within the road-take at the foot of the motte were fully excavated by archaeologists (Navan Inner Relief Road Sites 1, 2 & 3, Giacometti & Halliday, Excavation Licences 06E024 & 06E274).

Initially it had been anticipated that the site would reveal activity associated with the late 12th century Anglo-Norman fortification of Navan Park Moat, however as the excavation progressed it became clear that this was not the case. Instead, the excavation exposed a strip through an Early Medieval landscape, which appears to have included settlement (both enclosed and unenclosed), burial remains (of uncertain date), agricultural field boundaries, corn-drying kilns, and craft-processing areas. This activity appears to have come to an end in the 9th century, centuries prior to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans, and at the same time as many other Early Medieval settlements were abandoned throughout the country (O’Sullivan & Harney 2008, 108).

The area of excavation comprised a strip measuring c. 130m in length that curved around the western side of Navan Moat hill, and was restricted to the narrow (c. 30m wide) route of the proposed new road. As a result, the features exposed were rarely complete, and generally extended into undisturbed ground beyond the corridor of the road. This was frustrating, as it meant that it was difficult to identify the overall morphology of the Early Medieval landscape, and

in particular it was impossible to establish with certainty which portions of the landscape had been enclosed with banks or ditches and which had been left unenclosed. On a more positive note, it also means that this evidence is preserved *in situ* for the future.

The following description of the site presents one possible interpretation of the excavated remains. This interpretation has been structured in three broad chronological phases spanning the Early Medieval Period (500 AD- 1150 AD), but these should only be seen as an organising principle, and in many cases phases may be contemporary with each other, or features within individual phases may have been utilised at different times. The full stratigraphic report, plans, photographs and specialist reports from the site can be downloaded from the Arch-Tech website ([www.arch-tech.ie/projects.html](http://www.arch-tech.ie/projects.html)).

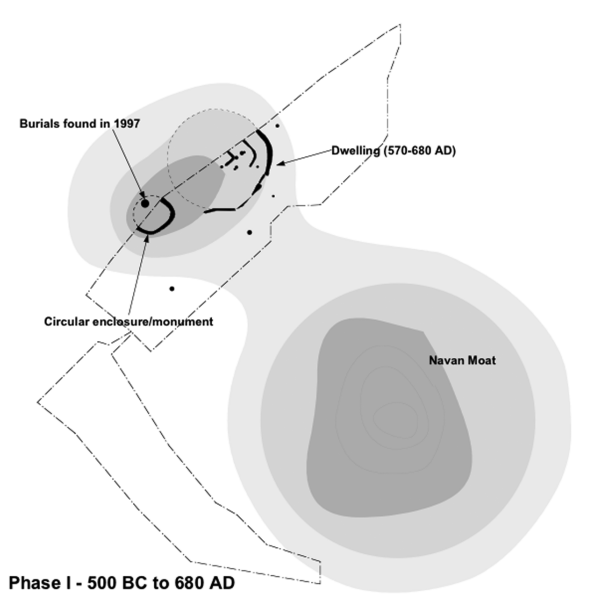
### **Phase I: Iron Age? To mid-7th Century**

The earliest activity identified on the site was centred on the low rise to the northwest of Navan Moat hill and was defined by two possible circular enclosures: a smaller but more substantial circular enclosure to the southwest at the crest of the rise that may have been associated with human burials; and a larger but less well-defined enclosure on the brow of the same rise to the northeast.

The exposed portion of the smaller Phase 1 enclosure suggested that it formed a circular shape at the highest point of the hill, defined by a substantial ditch (about 1m deep and over 1m wide) that surrounded an area of perhaps 7m in diameter. The fills within the ditch were almost sterile, containing only a small amount of animal bone and some carbonised barley. A single radiocarbon determination obtained from oak charcoal in one of the uppermost fills yielded date of 6632-6478 BC, which would place it in the Mesolithic period. That this date coincided the creation or use of the enclosure was considered improbable by the excavator, not least because the fill it derived from produced clear evidence of developed agriculture consistent with a much later period (Halliday 2007). No entrances were noted within the excavated area, and no features were identified within the circular ditch.

An earlier test-trenching programme in 1997 (Breen, Licence 97E101) had identified two human burials and more disarticulated human bone at the highest point of the rise, immediately to the northwest of (and outside of) the present site. These were undated

Figure 3.  
Phase I  
500 BC to  
680 AD



crouched inhumations oriented west-east without grave goods, but associated with a small piece of iron and unworked fragments of quartz. On this basis an Iron Age to Medieval date range seems likely. Their exact position was difficult to ascertain, but it appears that they would have been enclosed within the putative extent of the circular ditch, which might therefore be interpreted as part of a burial monument. Ancestral burial monuments of this type are known in both the Iron Age and Early Medieval period, and appeared to have remained in use until the 7th or 8th centuries AD (see discussion of *Ferta* in O'Brien 1992, 130-7).

The larger enclosure on the brow of the rise was defined by a shallow ditch which followed a stony ridge in the natural geology. The main entrance was located to the southeast, and was clearly defined by two deepened ditch termini, between which ran a slot trench that probably formed a threshold or gate feature. One of the ditch termini was filled with an unusual animal bone assemblage, including a red deer antler sawn for craftwork, two fox bones, and three semi-articulated lambs likely to represent triplets naturally aborted late in pregnancy.

This ditch enclosed a space *c.* 25m in diameter, within which were a rectangular structure (that may have been a sleeping area or house),

numerous cooking pits containing charred cereal grains and fragments of burnt animal bone, and rubbish pits containing more cooking waste. Fiona Beglane, who examined the animal bone from the site, noted that the bones from this larger circular enclosure displayed a high degree of secondary butchery indicative of cooking and eating, particularly when compared to other parts of the site. She also noted that the bone remains showed little sign of having been left exposed for any length of time, and were concentrated in rubbish pits and in the fills of the outer ditches, but absent in and around the structures, which may indicate a certain level of housekeeping. Overall, the evidence for possible sleeping areas, cooking, eating and housekeeping, all enclosed by a formal curving enclosure and defined (and possibly gated) entrance, suggest that this complex functioned as a dwelling.

The broad term 'dwelling' is used because the overall form of this enclosure could not be ascertained within the area excavated. A dwelling is defined here as the primary locus of domestic activity where the entire household resides and interacts, and includes primary structures (houses or homes), smaller ancillary structures, hearths/cooking areas and some sort of circumambient space, all of which may have been enclosed (e.g. Ashmore & Wilk 1988, 121). This dwelling conforms with previously identified enclosed rural dwellings found on other Early Medieval sites.

It is unclear whether the two Phase I enclosures on the top of the low rise were contemporary. As mentioned above, the smaller enclosure (a possible burial monument) may date to between 500 BC and c. 700 AD, whereas radiocarbon dating from the larger dwelling enclosure indicate that it was in use during the period 570-680 AD. Regardless of whether the smaller circular enclosure is contemporary with or predates the dwelling, it would appear likely that both were visible at the same time, and that the members of the household residing in the dwelling were aware of, and perhaps felt attached to, the individuals buried within the smaller enclosure.

It is also unclear whether the adjacent hill of Navan Moat was occupied at this time. Considering the high visibility and dramatic form of the hill, it seems likely that Navan Moat hill would have been the scene of some sort of Early Medieval activity. However, in the absence of archaeological investigation of this area, we cannot say whether such activity may have taken the form of (for example) a dwelling (high-status or otherwise), ceremonial-ritual site, or defensive

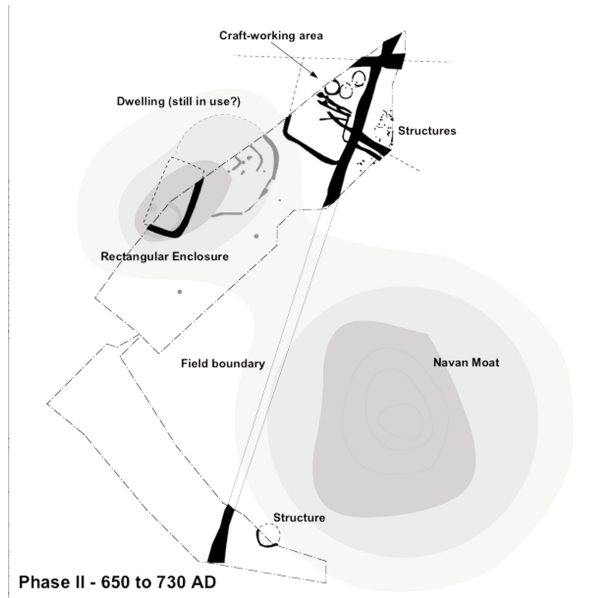
fortification. If Navan Moat hill was utilised during the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries AD, it would have looked over and dominated the dwelling and burial enclosure to the northwest.

**Phase II: Mid 7<sup>th</sup> Century to early 8<sup>th</sup> Century**

The second phase of Early Medieval activity on the site was characterised by very large ditches which appeared to define rectangular spaces, in contrast to the earlier rounded shapes seen in Phase I.

One of these large Phase II ditches was situated at the top of the low rise, truncating the earlier circular enclosure which had by that stage been completely infilled. The exposed portion of the ditch (measuring c. 3m wide and over 1m deep) was L-shaped in plan, and extending beyond the excavated area. This ditch may have formed two sides of a rectangular or square enclosure (radiocarbon dated to 640 – 695 AD). A deposit of well-sorted rounded boulders near the southern corner of this possible enclosure was interpreted as an entrance causeway facing southeast. The only feature identified within this possible enclosure was a rectangular pit (which also cut into the infilled surface of the earlier Phase I circular ditch). Finds

Figure 4.  
Phase II –  
650 to  
730 AD.



from these features included a bone pin and part of a bone comb. The ditch also contained a relatively small amount of animal bone, and twenty fragments of human bone were recovered from its northern end. The presence of disarticulated human bone within the fill of the L-shaped ditch does not necessarily imply that burials were disturbed during the construction of the ditch, as the scattered remains ended up in the ditch as it was being infilled, and such disturbance could have occurred much later, during the monument's destruction or collapse.

What was the function of this rectangular enclosure? Although the majority of the projected enclosure extended outside of the excavation, the lack of evidence that it was a dwelling suggests it had a different function. It also seems likely that the Phase I dwelling directly northeast of it remained in use during Phase II, in which case it seems reasonable to assume that this same household constructed the rectangular enclosure. The household were almost certainly aware that the pre-existing circular monument on the crest of the low hill marked a burial place, even though its ditch would have been substantially infilled by this time. One possibility is that the replacement of the earlier circular burial monument with a larger rectangular one represents the enlargement and re-dedication of an ancestral burial place.

The NNE-SSW orientation of the rectangular enclosure on the hill-top was reflected in the identical orientation of a very large (2-3m wide) ditch running along the saddle formed between the rise and the Moat hill. This had multiple phases of use over the course of the mid-7th to 9th centuries AD (based on the stratigraphic and radiocarbon dating evidence), and possibly remained open into the medieval and



Figure 5. Early medieval iron knife from the site.

post-medieval periods. The ditch appeared to run straight in a NNE-SSW direction for c. 200m, in which case it would have formed a boundary between the high point to the east (Navan Moat hill) and the low rise to the west. A bank probably ran along its eastern side, judging from the consistent absence of archaeological features for 4-5m on this side of the boundary. The boundary ditch formed a T-shaped or cross-shaped junction at its northern end, just at the edge of the site, with further ditches continuing to the north, east and west beyond the excavated area. These Early Medieval boundaries do not correspond with later documented field or townland boundaries, probably because of the extensive modification to the landscape and property holdings following the Anglo-Norman invasion.

The position of the ditch half-way between the two high points of the immediate landscape, both of which might have been occupied by different households, suggests the possibility that the boundary ditch marked the extent of individual properties, as well as possibly marking areas of cultivated land or pasture. The establishment of the land boundary between the occupants of the dwelling on the low rise, and any possible households occupying Navan Moat hill, may represent the replacement of undefined or communal/community tenure, potentially within the ambit of a local lord or strong farmer, with a system of ownership or control based on individual households or groups of households. The suggestion that the household(s) around Navan Moat hill had reason to define the edges of their land in or just after the mid-7<sup>th</sup> Century need not imply a general breakdown (or fissioning) of Early Medieval society. Doherty (1998), however, has suggested that early medieval society was changing into a proto-feudal system with an emphasis on grain as a storeable tradeable wealth during the 7th to 10th centuries, and it is possible that such a change is visible here.

In this context, it is interesting to consider the similar orientations and dates of the rectangular enclosure (interpreted as an enlarged ancestral burial monument) and the boundary ditch, and tempting to suggest that the two are linked in other ways. The physical marking of the extent of land that households controlled may be mirrored in the symbolic marking of ancestral ties to the land through the recreation of the burial monument; and the creation of a boundary *between* households may have been emphasised by the re-working of a monument reflecting ancestral lineages that may have distinguished one family from another.





Figure 6. Early medieval bone pin from the site.

The rectangular enclosure and the large boundary ditch were not the only features dated to Phase II. The largest concentration of features from this phase were situated in the north of the site on the flatter land at the base of the sloping hill, just downhill of the Phase I dwelling. These may have been enclosed inside a rectangular or D-shaped ditched enclosure running off the large field boundary, but this could not be established with any certainty. A number of features seemingly associated with craft-working and processing were identified in this area. These included a curving ditch incorporating a kiln or furnace and water management features; a series of inter-cutting gullies full of charcoal; a cluster of three craft-huts, pens or stores; and a short-lived area of informal iron-working. Many of the features displayed frequent evidence of maintenance and alteration, demonstrating that they were in use over a significant period of time. The water-management features found in the curving ditch were formed by a complex of gullies and postholes that appeared to support a sluice to control the flow of water through the ditch. This ditch also contained the most interesting artefactual assemblage from this end of the site consisting of three curved and tanged iron knives and a bone weaving tool.

The iron-working area was situated in a partially-filled ditch to the northeast of the site. The sunken area was presumably chosen to provide protection from the wind, and to shade the working area enabling the smith to assess the state of the worked metal by colour. A small blacksmith's hearth was found, from which oak charcoal was identified, with an adjacent flat stone that may have supported the tuyère or bellows (Tim Young pers. comm.). The iron-working remains suggested that small-scale blacksmithing (rather than iron production) was carried out here during the late 7th or 8th century ( $C^{14}$  dated to 668-784 AD). This scale of metallurgical work is consistent with the

needs of a self-sufficient ‘farmer-smith’ who conducted his or her own metal-working on a seasonal or opportunistic basis. The three small circular huts or houses are difficult to interpret. They appear to have been badly truncated, with only the outer drip gullies surviving. Charred grains in one of the house gullies returned a Late Medieval radiocarbon date, however the shape of the features and position in relation to other Early Medieval features on the site suggest that these are of Early Medieval date. A comparison with other Early Medieval houses/structures (Lynne 1994; O’Sullivan & Harney 2008, 125) shows that they are of typical shape and size.

Analysis of the animal bone assemblage recovered from this area suggested that it represented primary butchery, ie. the slaughtering of livestock, skinning and chopping up large joints, in contrast with the bone assemblage from the dwelling just up the hill which showed evidence for filleting and eating (Fiona Beglane 2007). Another interesting feature was the relative absence of horn-cores, which suggested that these had been collected and sent elsewhere for crafting into objects.

Although only barely within the excavated area of the site, some structures were noted on the eastern side of the large field/property boundary. To the north were two clusters of postholes and gullies, but they did not resemble the other structures on the site and their date and function were unclear. A further possible circular structure was noted to the south of the site, and was radiocarbon <sup>r</sup> dated to 640-695 AD. If the interpretation of the large ditch as a property boundary is correct, these features may be associated with an Early Medieval settlement on Navan Moat hill itself.

### **Phase III: 8th and 9th Centuries**

During the third phase of activity on the site a new ditch was constructed, establishing a new boundary or large enclosure that ran from the Phase II rectangular enclosure down towards Navan Moat hill, before turning sharply and running southwest. This new boundary truncated the Phase I dwelling which appears to have fallen out of use by this time. The focus of new construction on the site now appears to have been towards the south, where a possible D-shaped enclosure (running off the new ditched boundary) was constructed. The earlier Phase II boundary ditch was certainly still in use during the 8<sup>th</sup> century, and it is probable that the craft-working area to the north of the site was also still in use.

Figure 7.  
Phase II –  
730 to  
900 AD.

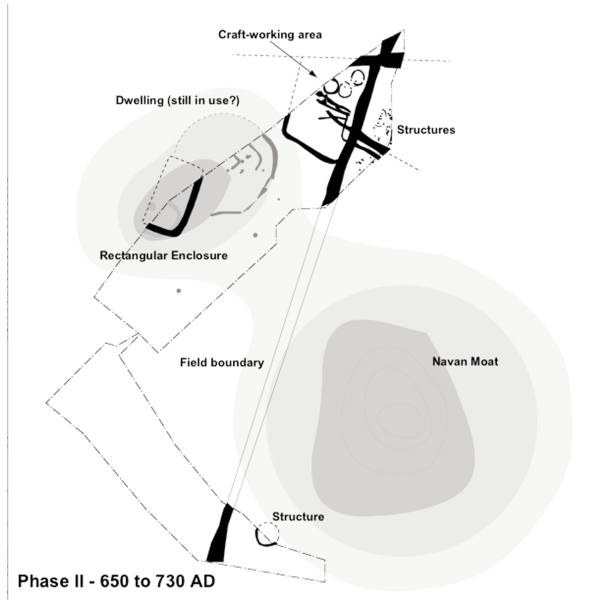


Figure 8.

The fact that the northern edge of the new field boundary stops just short of the possible rectangular burial monument seems to imply a connection between the new and the old. One might imagine a situation where a large family is sub-dividing its land, forming new households whilst simultaneously demonstrating a shared ancestry. The new ditched boundary seems to create a wedge of land defined by the Phase II and III boundary ditches, between and to the south of the two areas of higher ground. The possible D-shaped enclosure (C<sup>14</sup> dated to 760-900 AD) contained the badly-truncated remains of a single sub-circular structure (c. 5m in diameter) represented by a ditch, and may have defined a dwelling (c. 40m by 25m in area), or perhaps a small livestock enclosure, but not enough evidence survived to argue the point either way.

Two key-hole shaped kilns were situated beside each other at the southern end of the excavated area, possibly associated with a small sub-rectangular structure (measuring c. 3m by 4m) defined by a slot trench or gully, but otherwise isolated from the rest of the features. The kilns were partially lined with stone, and were both C<sup>14</sup> dated to 760-900 AD. Samples of material taken from within the kilns were analysed by Susan Lyons, and found to contain charred remains of

barely, oat and wheat, suggesting they were used as corn-drying kilns. A further possible circular structure to the east of the kilns and across the main boundary ditch appeared to have been in use in both Phases II and III (with C<sup>14</sup> dates of 640-695, 660-785 & 760-900 AD), and extended north beyond the limits of the excavation. This possible structure was defined by a series of shallow curving slot trenches or gullies, and had a central pit packed with charcoal and charred plant remains, suggesting it may have been a rubbish pit for kiln waste. It may have formed part of the corn-drying kiln complex, despite being on the opposite side of the boundary ditch, or possibly was associated with another area of crop-processing outside the excavated area. Kiln waste was also noted along the base of the boundary ditch, confirming that it was an open feature at the time the kiln complex was in use.

### **Exploring domestic space**

The above interpretation of the Early Medieval landscape below Navan Moat hill has emphasised the ways in which the household(s) living here defined their landscape, establishing their ownership and emphasising differences with other surrounding households.

It was intended that this article would address the question of domestic and non-domestic space within this landscape, but in practice it is very difficult to differentiate between the two on an archaeological settlement site (e.g. Binford 1978, 330-5). Dwellings are clearly primary foci of domestic space, but domestic activity is not confined to the dwelling, only organised by it, and this activity necessarily spills out over the edge of the dwelling into the surrounding landscape. Areas close to the dwelling, such as cattle enclosures, field systems or resource-processing areas, all played a role in the daily lives of the household and must be seen as domestic spaces. Even areas far from home can be essentially domestic. Archaeologists have identified booleying huts on higher land forming temporary settlement where members of the household moved with the livestock in the summer (O'Sullivan & Downey 2003, AA17/4/66). We would expect that archaeological objects found at these booleying huts would be indicative of typical domestic tasks such as cooking, cleaning, making butter, and so on. These places are extensions of the domestic sphere, but they are not dwellings in the sense that the term is used above.

The term 'domestic' is defined here as meaning 'of the household'. The household is usually defined as the most basic unit of production

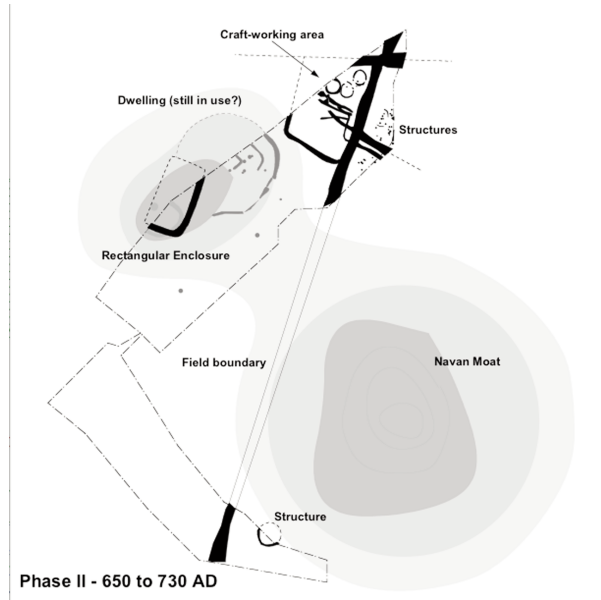
and consumption (both economic and social) in society (Allison 1999; Sharer & Ashmore 1987, 439; Steadman 1996, 55-8). Households work together on tasks involving production, distribution, transmission and reproduction, within a particular social relationship. Importantly, a household is a social unit, made up of a number of co-ordinating individuals, rather than something tangible one can excavate (Ashmore & Wilk 1988, 6). Thus a household need not equate with a dwelling ('the physical structure or area within which residential activities took place', *ibid*).

Adopting this definition, it becomes apparent that even the suggested burial monuments to the northwest of Navan Moat hill were domestic in nature, at least in so far as they have been interpreted as 'belonging' in some way to the household living nearby. These monuments (if they are that) did not look like ordinary domestic structures, and the finds here (e.g. human remains) did not resemble ordinary domestic assemblages, but I would argue that this was not because the monuments were not domestic, but rather that they were not ordinary. These monuments may have been of enormous significance to the household, as a physical reminder of what held them together, tied them to this land, and separated them from others: in short a fundamental part of definitions of 'home' (e.g. Blanton 1994, 79-80; and the '*domus*' of Hodder 1990, 44-5).

But in this have we widened the definition of 'domestic space' so far as to make the term completely useless? No, because if 'domestic' is defined by actions and tasks concerning the social unit of the household, then it follows that actions or tasks concerning larger social units (several co-operating households, or the entire community) are different. Non-domestic may not be a good term here, because these social units represent nested levels of interaction rather than mutually exclusive ones, so perhaps a term like supra-domestic would be more appropriate (if even more unwieldy). Spaces that are focuses of interaction between several households, or individuals from several households, or the entire community, are good places to look for activity that goes beyond the domestic sphere.

In the case of this landscape around Navan Moat hill, that place would seem to be the large Phase II ditched and banked boundary that may have separated the properties of two or more households. In fact, the

Figure 8:  
Domestic &  
Non-domestic  
space



size, shape and artefact assemblage from the ditch were essentially the same as elsewhere on the site, and would not in themselves indicate a function that went beyond the domestic. There was one feature of the ditch, however, that might suggest it played a role above and beyond the domestic sphere, and this was its longevity. The ditch had numerous phases of cutting and recutting (at least four completely different ditches had been dug along the same course). It was also noted that much later ditches often respected the line of completely infilled earlier ditches, suggesting these may have been marked above the ground in some way, by a bank, hedge or fence. The boundary appears to have been marked well into the medieval period, a span of up to 1,000 years, far longer than any of the other features on the site. 'Persistence' has been used as an anthropological marker of certain types of supra-household organisation, especially when concerned with land-holding and property rights (Hayden & Cannon 1982, 133-6) - might this have been a clue that the boundary feature was operating on a scale, and with a function, that transcended the domestic sphere?

At the southern end of the site, a cluster of corn-drying kilns was identified near the large boundary ditch: two kilns on the west side,

and a feature filled with kiln-waste filled to the east. These were associated with two possible sub-circular structures, one to the east and one to the west on either side of the large ditch. Unlike the features elsewhere on the site, these kilns and structures appear to have been unenclosed. Kilns are often found on Early Medieval settlements, and are generally situated some distance from the main dwelling, a pattern considered to reflect a concern about setting fire to the buildings, which seems sensible. However, what if other considerations were also in play? In this article I have deliberately tried to examine the archaeological evidence independent of the interpretation of historical sources for Early Medieval society, but in this instant a comparison is very tempting. The 8<sup>th</sup> century law-tract the *Cith Gabblach* discusses the various grades of Early Medieval landowners and states that an *ócaire* (a junior grade of freeman), for example, had a share in a kiln, a barn and a mill. This is intriguing, suggesting as it does that in some cases mills, kilns and barns might have been built, operated, maintained and owned by more than one household, and thus might be good places to look for activities which go beyond the domestic. Could this space below Navan Moat hill, straddling both sides of the boundary ditch, have acted as a locus for supra-domestic activity and inter-household interaction? As with everything on this site, we cannot be certain, but we can at least suggest the possibility.

### **Conclusion**

Much of the existing vocabulary traditionally used by archaeologists to describe Early Medieval settlement emphasises architectural form, rather than function. The terminology concerns the material used in the construction of enclosing ditches (cashel, rath) or the shape of the ditches (e.g. multivallate, ringfort, plectrum-shaped, etc.). This is probably due to early settlement studies that focused on survey rather than excavation, and the relative paucity of artefactual evidence recovered when excavation was carried out at all but a handful of major sites (e.g. Edwards 1990, 8-9). Subsequent years of excavation work at these sites has demonstrated that they had numerous different functions, from residences to livestock enclosures and perhaps enclosed fields or gardens, but in general the existing vocabulary has been retained and refined rather than changed.

At the Early Medieval settlement below Navan Moat hill, we were unable to apply this existing terminology because we did not know the

shape or overall layout of the enclosures. As a result, it was necessary to adopt a different vocabulary to describe this landscape. Rather than using vague and passive terms such as ‘uncertain-shaped enclosure’ or ‘residential’, I have tried in this article to use words that emphasise actions (cooking, eating, sleeping, ‘dwelling’). I hoped that by doing this I would bring the people who carried out these tasks to the front of the archaeological interpretation, rather than lurking in the shadows behind it, as they all too often tend to do.

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