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Ring(s) of truth: responses regarding curious ring-marks at Dowth

Joe Fenwick, Autumn 2019, *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 33(3), p. 42.

Following a request for further information at the end of my 'Ever-increasing Circles' article (*Archaeology Ireland*, Summer 2019), which concerned the curious barrow-like rings recorded in one of Leo Swan's aerial photographs of Dowth, I was pleased to have received a few emails in response.

The first, from a colleague who will remain nameless, took me to task for questioning the veracity of a very obvious barrow cemetery. His argument shook my confidence for a time but, given the evidence to the contrary, I remain unconvinced.

The second from Paddy Boyle suggested these might be related to 'fairy-' or 'mushroom-rings'. I'm familiar with these having encountered one during the course of the geophysical survey of Knowth Area 10, which produced a strange electrical resistance response (see *Ríocht na Midhe* 2019, Vol. 30). On researching this phenomenon a little further, I'm not entirely convinced that this resolves the issue either.

A third email that I received from Elizabeth Twohig, however, has a certain ring of truth to it (pun intended). She suggests that the rings in question are related to horse/pony training activity, which was at the time, and remains to the present day, a passionate pastime of the local residents in that part of county Meath. To coin a term new to archaeological discourse, these are 'longeing rings' (pronounced 'lungeing' apparently, even with a Meath accent). These tell-tale rings are the result of poached ground and damaged vegetation produced by the hooves of a trotting horse/pony tethered to the end of a longeing rope held by a trainer equipped with longeing whip, who endeavours to 'turn' the animal in a circle. The diameter of the rings can vary depending on the size of the animal, with larger diameters required for bigger horses and smaller diameters for ponies of lesser size.

Over a number of weeks one would imagine that it would be preferable to move this activity around the field in order to prevent excessive damage to the ground surface in any one spot. One can also imagine that if the same circle was used repeatedly it could very easily result in a lasting low-relief circular depression. Perhaps then, in certain instances, without the benefit of additional corroborating evidence, some caution should be exercised in identifying all low-relief, ring-like topographical features as the faint footprint of a weathered and eroded ring-barrow.

Thanks again to Elizabeth for her inspired observation. Elementary! Case closed!