

Excavation of a section of the *Rian Bó Phádraig* near Ardfinnan

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Introduction

The upgrading of a forestry road as part of the development of the Ardfinnan Regional Water Supply Scheme impacted on a section of the linear earthwork known as the *Rian Bó Phádraig*, in Kildanoge townland in Ballybacon parish, Co. Tipperary.¹ The trackway lay on the east side of the Glengalla River close to a fording point across the river. It was proposed to build a bridge across the river at that point to provide vehicular access to the west side of the river. A forestry track had previously cut through the *Rian* adjacent to the ford (Fig. 1).

History of the Area

The site is within the townland of Kildanoge and the townland name implies the existence of an ancient church site within the area. The generic element of the place name, "Kill", refers to the church and the specific element "Danoge" refers to the associated saint, perhaps "Finoge" or Finnín of nearby Ardfinnan. The precise location of the church is unknown.²

The ancient trackway *Rian Bó Phádraig* (SMR Co. Tipp 088-026; 091-002) is recorded on the Ordnance Survey maps within the area of proposed development. This trackway is recorded and discussed by Canon P. Power in an article in 1905. Power translates the word *rian* as a track and the remaining element (*Bó Phádraig*) translates as "of St. Patrick's cow".³

The trackway is an ancient route which links the ancient ecclesiastical centres of Cashel and Ardmore and is probably related to the Early Christian period⁴ monastic network in Munster. The track is recorded by Power (*op cit.*) as being 52 miles long. Some sections were, at the time Power was writing, "well nigh effaced" (p. 111) by years of cultivation. As regards the section that crosses the terrain between Ardfinnan and Lismore it was possible "from physical traces and remains and by the aid of a well defined and emphatic tradition, to practically reconstruct the road line and follow it in detail" (p. 113).

At the turn of the century the track varied in appearance and Power (*op cit.*) describes the feature as "a slight depression in the earth, say seven feet in width, flanked by grassy banks from a few inches to a couple of feet in height" (p. 118). A description of the trackway in 1922⁵ on the north facing slopes of the Knockmealdown mountains describes the trackway as "two parallel banks . . . about the width of an ordinary road . . . the banks appear about two or three feet above the average level of the hillside". A section of the trackway was cut through during work on the Clogheen-Cappoquin road and Power (*op cit.*) records the road contractors' description of the track as being "indicated by a deep deposit of rich black earth, distinguished from the surrounding soil" (p. 118).

The Site

The route of the *Rian Bó Phádraig*, as identified by Power, in the area between Goatenbridge and Lismore follows the channel of the Glengalla River into the Knockmealdown Mountains.

The trackway lies on the east side of the river for approximately 2.2 km south of Goatenbridge and crosses over an unnamed stream just upstream of its confluence with the Glengalla, at a natural fording point. The *Rian* then continues along the east side of the Glengalla river further south into the Knockmealdown mountains.

The excavation site is located on the east bank of the Glengalla river just south (upstream) of its confluence with the unnamed stream. The line of the trackway was visible in the area to the south of the excavation site, although it was overgrown with scrub and small trees. Immediately to the north of the site the trackway had been cut and damaged by the construction of a forestry road in the 1940s.

It was also difficult to ascertain the exact line of the track north of the forestry road as the combination of forestry work and river erosion seem to have removed visible traces of the *Rian* in that area although it is visible again once on the other side of the ford across the unnamed stream. The trackway had been used by local people, until the planting of conifers by the forestry authority, to walk to the Cistercian monastery at Mount Melleray on the other side of the Knockmealdown Mountains. It was also used to provide access to a house further up the valley.

Prior to excavation the trackway appeared as a linear earthwork consisting of two parallel banks speared by a narrow ditch. The pre-excavation banks were quite low, approximately 0.5 m high on the west side, 0.2 m maximum on the east and merging into the surrounding area. The trackway was 2.5 m wide and 0.70 m below the surrounding ground level. This description of the trackway in the vicinity of the fording point across the Glengalla is consistent with the description of the *Rian Bó Phádraig* given by Power in 1905 (see above).

The area of the *Rian Bó Phádraig* was covered by scrub and small trees prior to investigation. No formal planting seems to have taken place on the trackway itself although the land in the immediate vicinity had been planted about forty years ago.

The Excavation (Figs. 2-4)

A cutting 9 m N/S and 6 m E/W was opened on the north side of the forestry road. A section 1.2 m wide was cut across the north end of the trackway as this area had already been damaged by the construction of the road.

Excavation revealed that the trackway had been cut through a natural gravel bank. The trackway cut (F4) was broadly "U"-shaped with steeply cut, almost vertical sides and a slightly curving base. It was 1.7 m wide and 0.7 m deep. The edges of the trackway (F4) were unweathered and a small amount of slip, F5, was found at the sides of the trench.

The slip was 0.02 m – 0.08 m thick, being thickest at the southern end of the cutting where slightly more weathering had taken place. The base of the trackway (F4) was covered by a layer of water rolled sandstone pebbles (average size 0.09 m x 0.11 m) which appeared to be a rough stone surface, F3. This was 0.08 m – 0.10 m thick and was partially covered at the edges by the slip layer, F5.

The sides of the trackway were apparently delimited by gravel and sand banks which stood to a height of 0.9 m above the base of the trackway. The banks were formed once the intermediary area was excavated to lay the trackway surface and were in fact, mainly undisturbed natural sand and gravel layers, left on either side of the trackway.

A dump of mainly large stones, F2, was found on the gravel banks on either side of the track, probably upcast from the cut, F4. The layer, F2, was 0.3 m – 0.5 m thick on the west side of the trackway with the stones (average size 0.44 m – 0.58 m) being piled on top of each other. On the east side F2 consisted of a single layer of stones laid in a discontinuous deposit on top of the sod.

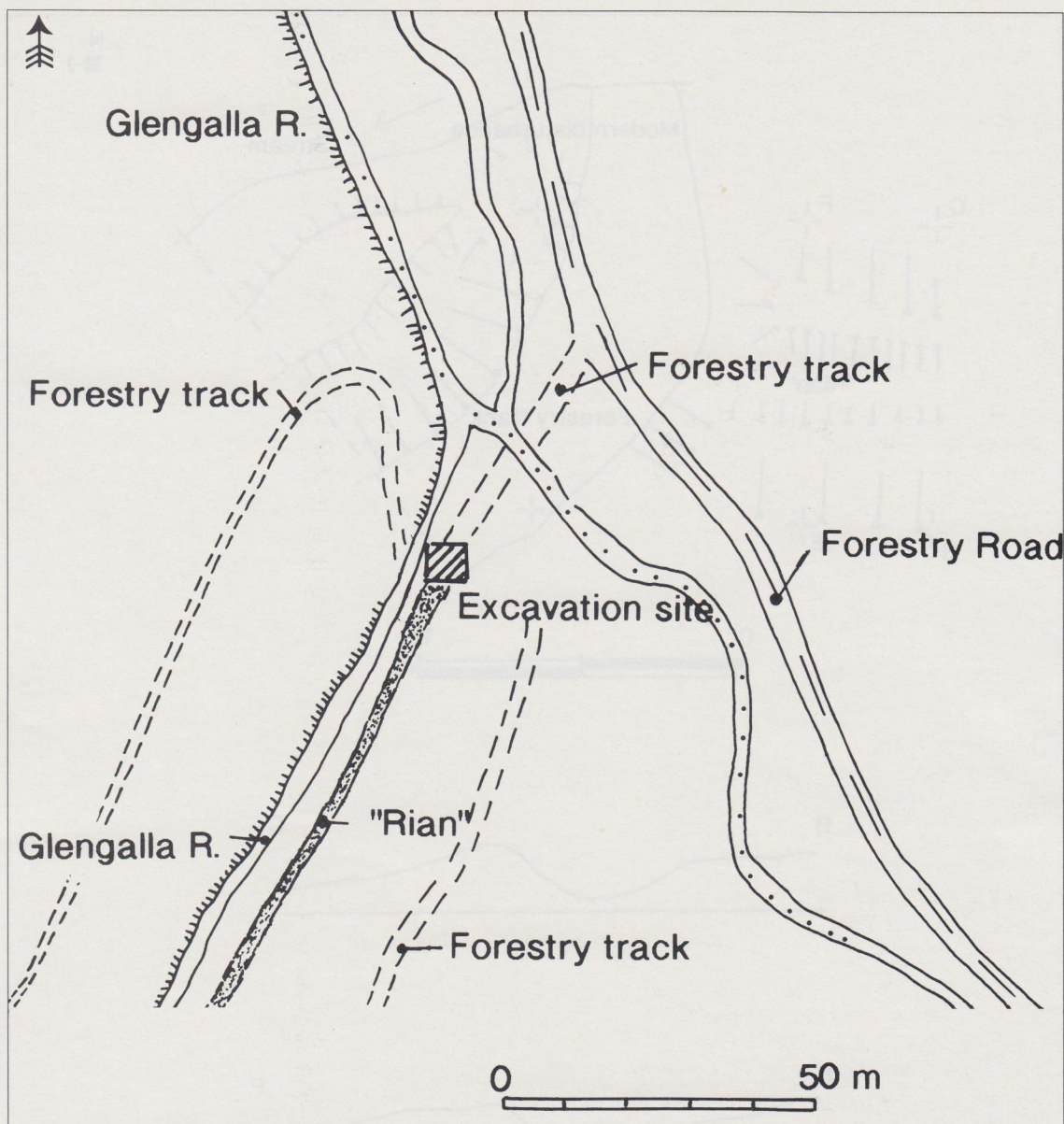


Fig. 1. – Site location map.

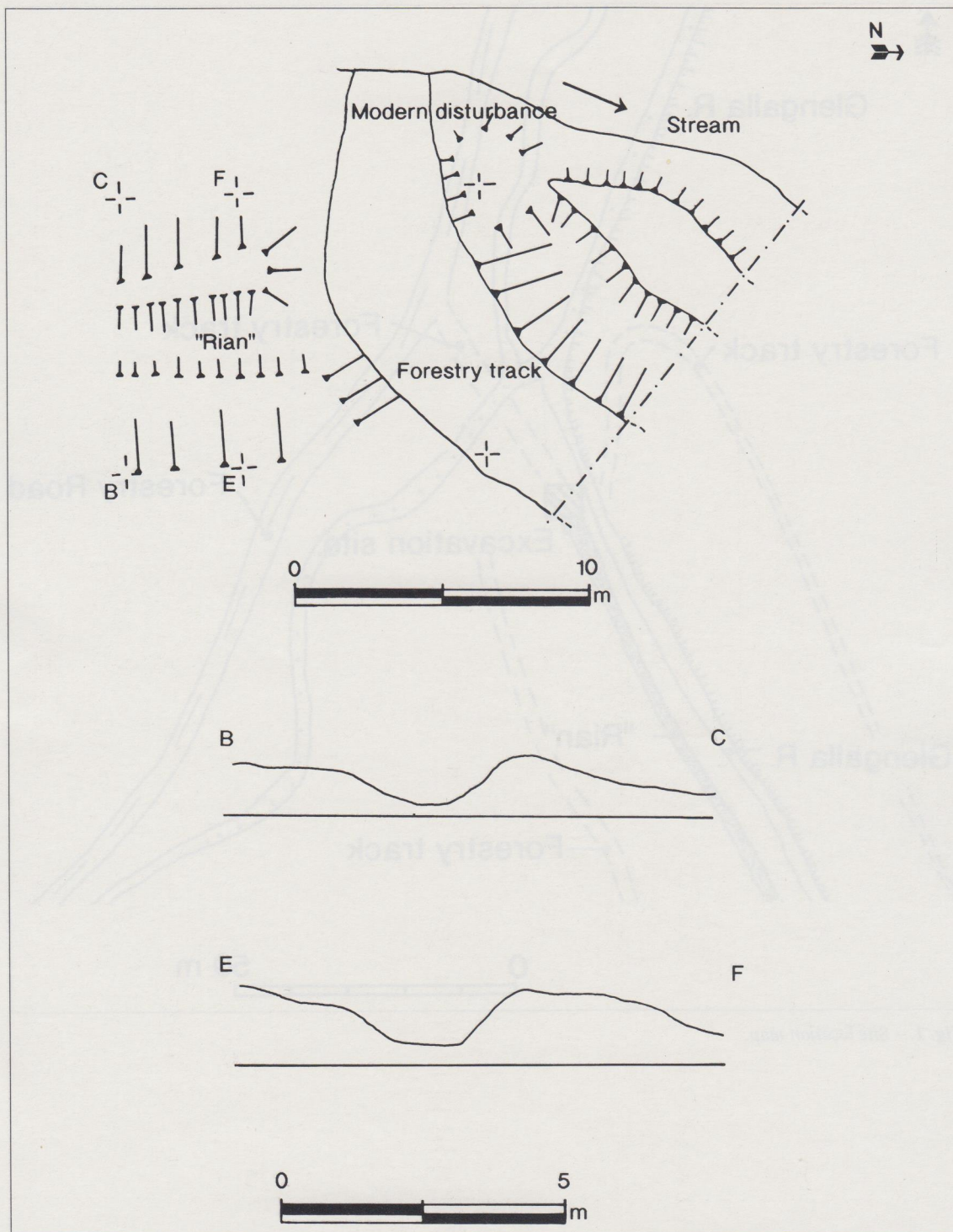


Fig. 2. – Pre-excitation survey and pre-excitation profiles (B-C; E-F) across "Rian".

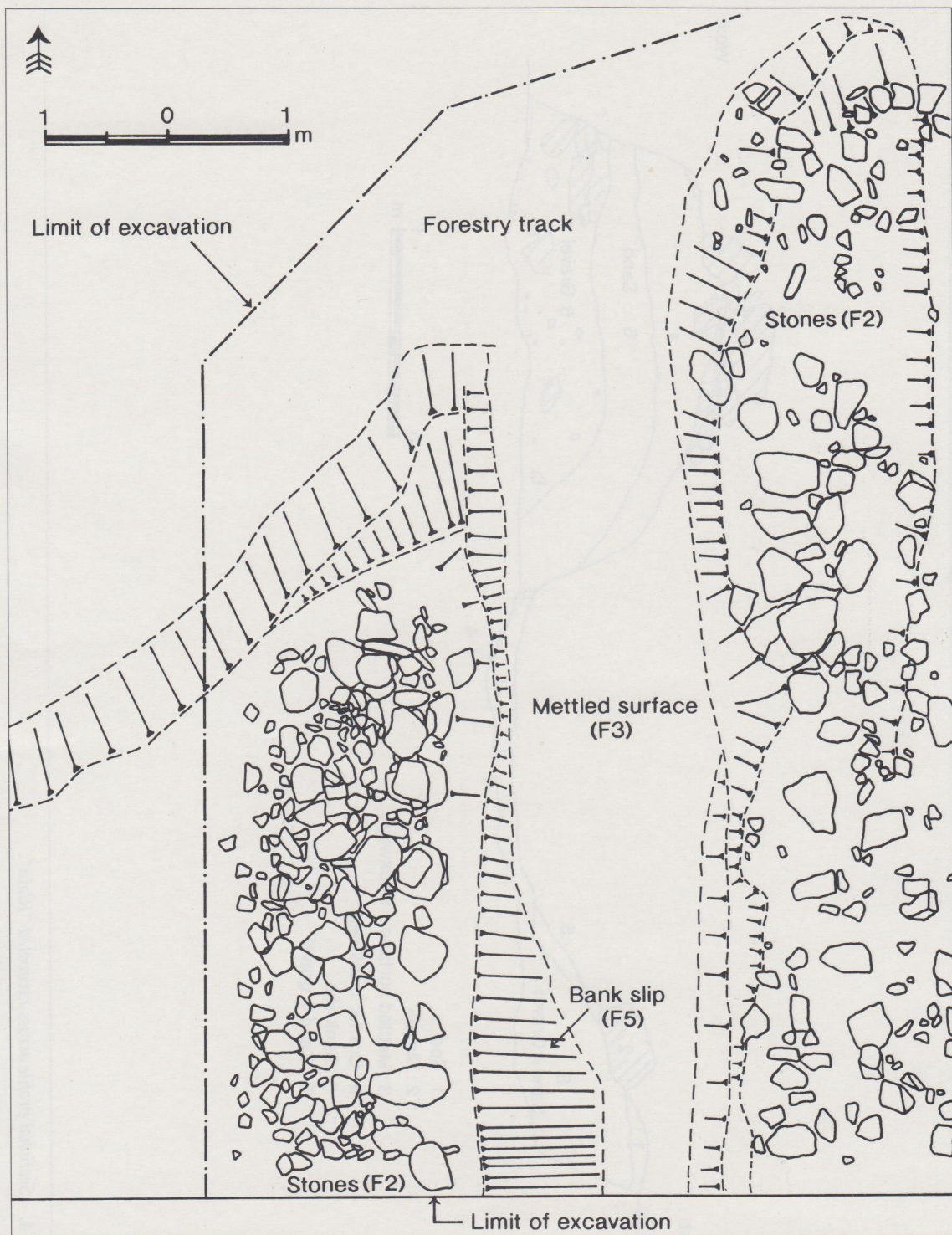


Fig. 3. – Plan of excavated features.

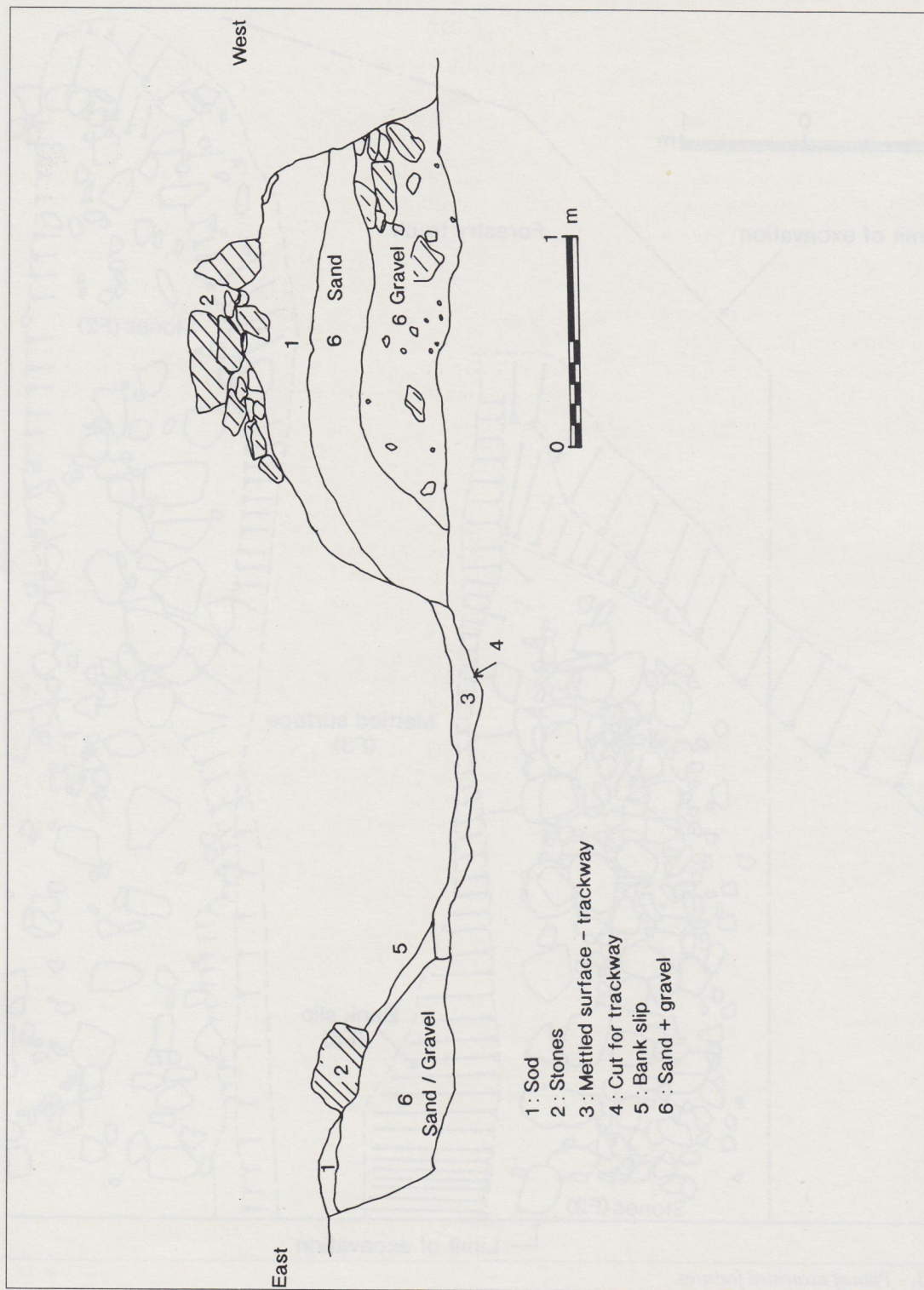


Fig. 4. - Sectional profile across excavated "Ruin".

Conclusions

A trench had been cut through a natural gravel bank on the east side of the Glengally River. The base of the trench had been covered by a layer of water rolled pebbles, probably to provide a rough surface in the loose gravel and indicating that the trench had indeed been used as a trackway.

There was no direct evidence found on the excavation that indicated a definite date for the trackway. The nature of the cut for the trackway itself, however, may offer some clue as to the date of its construction. The sides of the trackway cut were not very abraded and there was little slippage present. This would indicate that the cutting of the trackway, F4, and the subsequent deposition of the stone surface, F3, probably took place in the relatively recent past, that is, within the last century and possibly associated with access to a now abandoned house further up the valley.

While there was no evidence to suggest an early date for the excavated section of track, it is possible that the ancient Rian ran along the present trackway and the features as it is observed today is the result of long and continued use.

FOOTNOTES

1. Exact site location: SMR TI091-00102, OS 6" sheet no. 92, Tipperary, 82 mm from west margin, 556 mm from south margin, NGR 20722/10814. Excavation number of site 97E482.
2. Power, 1905, "The Rian bó Phádraig" (The ancient highway of the Decies) in *J. Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, Vol. 35, pp 110-129. p. 116, says the church was located further south where the linear trackway *Rian Bó Phádraig* crosses the Tar river.
3. Legend has it that St. Patrick's cow and calf were grazing by the river Tar in South Tipperary when the calf was stolen by a thief from Kilwaternmoy in Co. Waterford. The cow pursued the thief and in her fury she tore up the earth with her horns, thus making a double trench or embankment on either side of a trackway.
4. 400 - 800 AD. The early church in Munster, particularly in the Decies area (West Waterford/South Tipperary) may owe its origin to pre-Patrician missionaries and actually pre-date the christianisation of the country by St. Patrick.
5. Written under the pseudonym "Cnocmaoldoon" (Clonmel) *Nationalist* newspaper, March 4, 1922.