

Medieval Timber and Earthwork Fortifications in Western Ireland

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IT IS BECOMING increasingly apparent that conventional classification schemes for medieval timber and earthwork fortifications in Ireland are compromised by two factors. First they depend upon ethnic categorization, an approach derived from assuming the innovatory ethos of the Anglo-Norman conquest which commenced in 1169. Second, until very recently, the role of the ringwork as a congener to the motte-and-bailey has been ignored. The evidence from western Ireland discussed in this paper points to a pre-Norman development of feudalism and its symbol, the private castle; ultimately, the conceptual and geographical contexts of these innovations are contemporary events elsewhere in the British Isles and northern France. The discussion further points to the probability that shortly after c. 1200, the ringwork — present from or even before 1169 — replaced the motte-and-bailey as the customary Anglo-Norman garrisoned fortress in Ireland, thereby providing an explanation for the curious easterly bias in the distribution of the latter.

INTRODUCTION

In the absence of substantive documentary evidence which might illustrate processes of colonization, the distributional pattern of timber and earthwork fortifications has assumed the role of a surrogate in charting Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland after 1169. But such reasoning is predicated upon an assumption that reliable chronological, morphological and ethnic designations of these features can be sustained. Conventionally, Irish earthworks have been categorized by their physical characteristics, allied to a strict ethnic-temporal classification in which ringforts (or raths) are held to be Gaelic and pre-invasion while mottes and moated sites are Anglo-Norman and thus date from after 1169. However, if we regard earthworks — like all settlements — not merely as morphological entities but as products of the requirements of particular economies and social structures, then ethnic classifications remain pertinent only if societies can be regarded as closed systems, immune to general processes of social change, particularly those characteristic of proximate regions. By the 12th century, NW. Europe was characterized by the structures of feudalism and as Saunders has remarked, the most potent symbol of that ideology was the private fortress.¹

In recent years, several historians — notably Ó Corráin, Byrne and Doherty — have emphasized the feudal nature of pre-Anglo-Norman society in Ireland, an ethos derivative ultimately of the contemporaneous experience of Britain in particular and NW. Europe in general.² Thus it can be argued, in contravention to the traditional interpretation of innovation derived essentially from the work of G. H. Orpen,³ that the Anglo-Norman colonization depended upon social and economic institutions already familiar to the Irish ruling élites. The logical extension of such reasoning is that feudal settlement forms — part of the means of translating an abstract ideological structure into the reality of space and place — would have been known to that nobility, particularly if the process was an imitative one. The consequence is obvious. Specific classes of medieval timber and earthwork fortifications in Ireland may be polygenetic, thereby negating the customary allocation of type, ethnicity and dating through field observation of morphological criteria.

The validity of traditional schemes has been compromised further by the belated recognition that the motte was not the sole Anglo-Norman timber and earthwork fortification in the island. There is some tentative evidence for the parallel existence of ringworks, a settlement form which Nicholls has suggested helps to account for the odd easterly bias of extant mottes,⁴ almost 350 examples of which have been listed by Glasscock.⁵ Over 90% of these are located in Ulster and Leinster, notwithstanding the major Anglo-Norman penetrations into Munster and Connacht. It is argued therefore that a substantive reinterpretation of medieval timber and earthwork fortifications in Ireland is necessary because traditional classification schemes may no longer account for either the societal or morphological evidence. In this study, particular attention is given to elucidating the nature of these features in Connacht — excepting Galway — and Munster (Fig. 1), areas settled to some degree by the Anglo-Normans. They were also regions characterized by incipient feudal practices prior to the invasion, an argument which places early medieval Ireland within NW. Europe's dominant mode of production and social integration.

CONTEXT AND QUESTIONS

Turning to the comparative context, Davison has argued for a relatively late and incomplete emergence of the motte-and-bailey in Normandy, grafted on to an older tradition of defence by ramparts and ditches known as *enceintes circulaires*.⁶ Saunders agreed that most of the 11th-century Norman castles were simple enclosures and argues that in England, some at least were later replaced by mottes which were thus not the original features.⁷ A ringwork has been defined as having a minimum height of 2 m above the level of the outside defences and King and Alcock observed that extant examples tend to possess small areas in relation to disproportionately powerful banks, the dominant feature of which might have been a gatehouse.⁸ While the ringwork and motte are dissimilar morphologically, the consensus is that both forms fulfilled the same societal function as private feudal fortresses, their genesis bound to that of the social structure. The early castles in Normandy were ducal, the proliferation of private fortresses being essentially a phenomenon of



FIG. 1
Location of sites discussed in text

the late 11th and 12th centuries.⁹ In England, as King and Alcock concluded, there are no distributional characteristics which might explain the incidence of mottes and ringworks; 'we are left . . . with little more than the accident of personal preference to account for any choice of ringwork as against motte'.¹⁰

The role of the motte as a private feudal fortress was recognized by such pioneering writers as Orpen and Knox and is implicit in more recent studies of Anglo-Norman fortifications in Ireland.¹¹ Conversely, very little attention has been given to the issue of ringworks despite Twohig's argument that the Anglo-Normans replicated familiar earthwork forms in Ireland.¹² However, ring-fortifications are exceedingly difficult to identify in the field because of their morphological similarity to raths; the problems are well explained in Barry's survey of the very tentative evidence in which 20 possible ringworks are discussed.¹³ He argued that to reach King and Alcock's ratio for England where there are 3.7 mottes to every ringwork, about 100 examples of the latter should occur in Ireland; however, the proportion might be closer to 1 : 1 as is true of S. Wales. Barry believed that both motte and ringwork existed from the beginning of Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland, their geographical distribution — adopting King and Alcock's arguments — being no more than a simple question of fashion. Conversely, McNeill implied a chronological variation combined with a functional differentiation, arguing that the ringwork — which he considers to have held a more important place in Anglo-Norman military architecture — acted as a campaign castle whereas the motte functioned as a garrisoned stronghold.¹⁴

The classic motte type is with a few exceptions absent in much of Munster and west of the Shannon in Connacht. Knox observed as long ago as 1911 that the Normans abandoned this settlement form in the latter region in favour of what he called the 'flat mote type'.¹⁵ While the distributional conclusion remains pertinent, it is apparent that most of the sites which he describes in Connacht would now be classified as rectangular moated sites or as platform raths. The latter were once held to have been Irish imitations of mottes¹⁶ while Knox assumed that they were Anglo-Norman, constructed perhaps as temporary entrenched camps.¹⁷ However, the major excavation at Rathmullan, Co. Down removed — unequivocally — the basis for such conclusions.¹⁸ This site, created by gradual accretion through successive occupation prior to the Anglo-Norman invasion, led Lynn to argue that the motte was not an innovation in Ireland but the recrudescence of a settlement or stronghold type long in use. Two other 'mound' sites in Ulster at Big Glebe, Co. Londonderry and Gransha, Co. Down also proved to be pre-Norman, both raised in one continuous sequence.¹⁹

Turning from morphological considerations to the social context of the stronghold it is worth reiterating Brown's point that Norman castles were brought into England as the symbol and substance of feudal lordship.²⁰ In turn recognizably feudal characteristics such as overlordship were evolving in Ireland from the 10th century onwards. However, the traditional thesis, derived in part from Giraldus Cambrensis and espoused by Orpen, held that the Irish lacked castles although there has always been an implicit belief that some ringforts must have functioned as fortresses. Again, there is the commonplace equation of the place-name element *dún*

with stronghold and the existence of crannogs, a settlement form of inherent strategic value. Encouraged by his arguments for pre-Norman feudalism in Ireland, Ó Corráin believed that early 12th-century Connacht was incastellated by its king, Turlough O Connor, who amongst other factors was influenced by the intimate contacts of Ireland with Britain.²¹ Nicholls has suggested that O Connor was erecting substantial earthen fortresses²² and Ryan regarded them as copies — in function at least — of those built in England and Wales by the Normans.²³

In summary, therefore, several ultimately conflicting notions can be derived from the literature to construct a discursive context for the evidence concerning timber and earthwork fortifications in western Ireland. Platform raths can no longer be regarded as post-1169 Irish imitations of mottes although the possibility that some examples were cannot be dismissed. Nevertheless, they may still represent a Gaelic adaptation of the motte concept which was relatively common in NW. Europe, long before the Anglo-Norman invasion of Ireland. Thus, through the crucial role of the private fortress in feudalism, it is conceivable that mottes and platform raths fulfilled synonymous social functions. Again, while the ringwork may have been used in Ireland in conjunction with mottes from 1169 onwards, an acceptance of the imitative institutional ethos of 12th-century Gaelic society points to the possibility of their construction prior to the invasion. However, the morphological similarity of ringwork and ringfort poses an insuperable problem in assessing the validity of this argument.

In the context of post-invasion settlement, the ringwork has been advanced as no more than a temporary encampment, the feudal function of garrisoned fortress being assumed by the motte. Alternatively, as in England and Wales, the motte and ringwork may have been identical functionally, the actual form adopted explicable by no more than the personal whim of the feudal seigneur involved. In contrast to this idea, the gaps in the Irish motte distribution, particularly in Munster and Connacht, might be explained through the prevalence of ringworks in these areas. This involves either a variation in longevity between the two variants or, alternatively, a chronological succession at odds with much of the evidence from England, Wales and Normandy in which it is held that the converse of ringwork-succeeded-by-motte occurred.

PRE-NORMAN TIMBER AND EARTHWORK FORTIFICATIONS

By far the best evidence for the erections of fortifications prior to 1169 relates to the incastellation of the 12th-century Kingdom of Connacht.²⁴ Not only is the morphology of these fortresses of concern but so too is the question as to whether vassals of overkings like Turlough O Connor built castles which might in turn demonstrate the existence of the hierarchical obligations that characterize feudalism. Ó Corráin observed that a number of O Connor fortresses are described by the words *caistel* or *caislen*, both appearing initially in the *Annals of Tigernach* in 1124.²⁵ He believed that a linguistic borrowing of this form points to something innovative about these strongholds which meant that the customary description of *dún* would not suffice. Of all the pre-Norman castles in Connacht, only Dún Leoda is described

normally by both *dún* and *caistel* although there is a solitary instance which refers to the *dún* of Athlone being levelled and demolished by the men of Meath in 1134.²⁶ It can be argued that the innovation of the *caislen* was institutional and functional rather than morphological for the 12th- and 13th-century annalists used the word habitually to refer to pre-invasion Irish fortresses, Norman earthworks — both ringworks and mottes — and Irish and Norman stone castles. Thus, *caislen* was perhaps a conceptual term describing a feudal fortress and embracing a number of morphological forms.

The best-documented O Connor fortresses were those at Athlone and Galway. The former, presumably on the same site as the extant castle, dates from 1129. Many times attacked, abandoned and rebuilt prior to the Norman invasion, successive continuity has destroyed any evidence of the early structures. Much the same is true of Galway where the first castle was built as early as 1124.²⁷ Despite a history of destruction and rebuilding similar to that of Athlone, an Irish castle remained here to be attacked and burnt by a Norman force under Miles Cogan in 1177.²⁸ Another early O Connor fortress was Dún Leoda (now Ballinasloe) on the Suck, erected in 1124 and destroyed in 1131 by casual fire.²⁹ Leask used this and similar evidence of a conflagration caused by a thunderbolt at Athlone to conclude that these fortresses were flimsy wooden affairs.³⁰ But if we adopt the logic that Turlough O Connor was influenced by and copied contemporary ideas from outside Ireland, mottes and ringworks of course had wooden towers, palisades and buildings.

Of the Connacht castles, only one site may remain to demonstrate a morphology characteristic of these fortresses. At Dunmore, Co. Galway — admittedly referred to only by the term *dún* in the 12th-century annals — a 14th-century keep stands on an earthwork generally held to be a motte with the remains of a fortifying wall around it. Additionally, Henry observed that there are traces of a very much larger fortification including traces of wooden towers.³¹ Knox observed that the mound at Dunmore had more or less the same dimensions as that at Bohola, Co. Mayo, a feature which, because of its elevated construction, he held to be a motte and thus Norman.³² However, this latter monument is much more likely to be a ringfort with heightened interior, the bevel or terrace feature — absent at Dunmore — which is circumjacent to the mound perhaps being the line of the earlier enclosing bank. Bohola, which is on average 8 m high with a flat-topped summit area of 40 m × 36 m, is in turn similar in appearance if not size to another site, Sheeaunbeg, Co. Roscommon, which is listed by Glasscock as a motte.³³ This earthwork — very overgrown — also has the terrace feature around a mound which is on average 6 m high with an ill-defined summit approximately 20 m in diameter (Fig. 2). The whole is enclosed by a fosse except on the eastern side where a bailey is linked to the mound by a gangway, a feature uncharacteristic of Norman military architecture but commonly found on platform raths.³⁴ Knox described this site as 'an enclosed esker', a natural isolated hill used as a motte.³⁵ It is much more probable that like Bohola this site is a heightened ringfort; neither has any specific documentary associations with the English. This is also true of two further platform monuments located close to Bohola, one of which — Carrow Castle — is very similar in size and height and also has discontinuous hints of a circumjacent bevel.

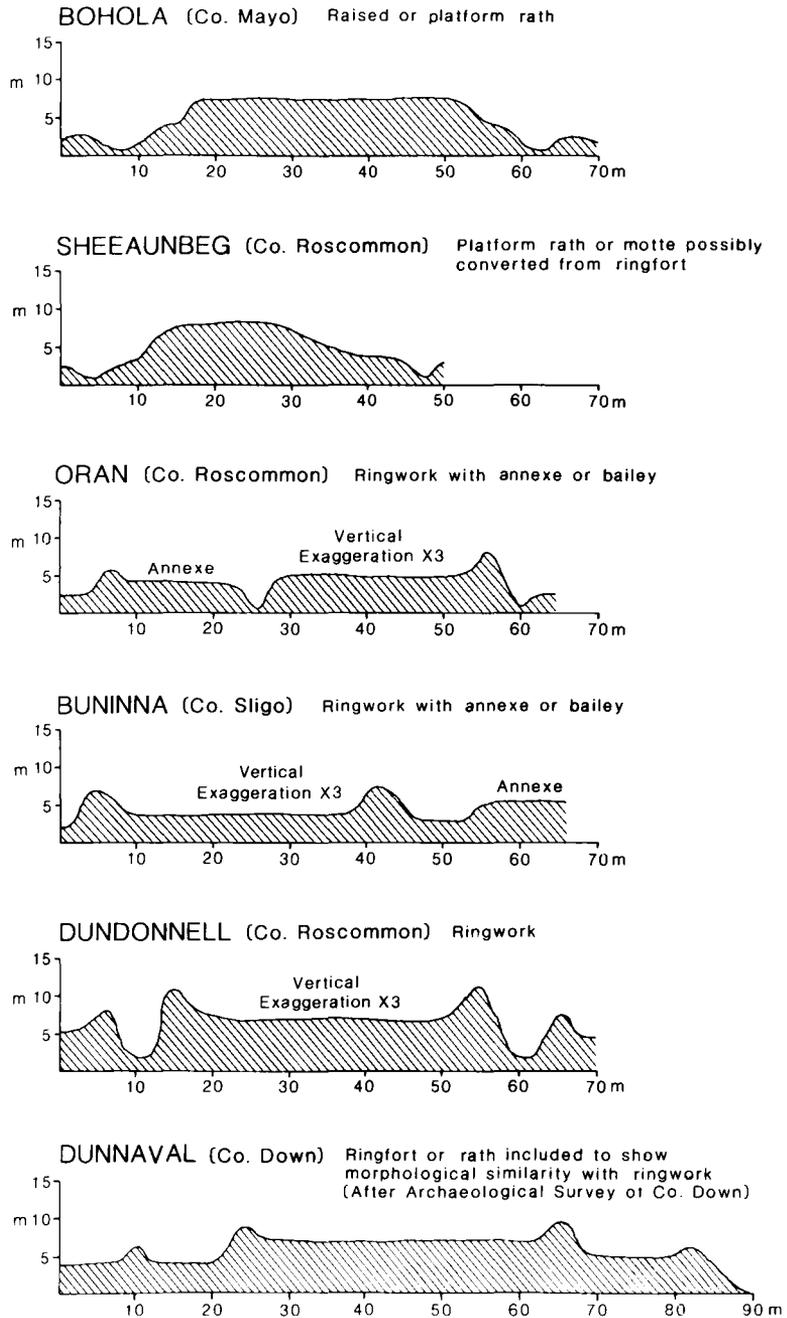


FIG. 2

Cross-sections of selected timber and earthwork fortifications

Knox unequivocally accepted all these sites as English for no better reason than the equation that a mound equals a Norman motte, a very precise demonstration of the interlinkage of ethnic and morphological criteria.³⁶ However, Lynn's excavations at Rathmullan, Big Glebe (with Bratt) and Gransha led him to conclude that 'some of the physical if not conceptual attributes of the motte had been adopted in Ireland several centuries before the coming of the Normans'.³⁷ It is argued here that there is circumstantial evidence that Lynn's qualification is unnecessary and that conceptually some so-called platform raths may represent pre-Norman mottes. The site at Dunmore differs from those around Bohola and at Sheeaunbeg only in its royal association. There are thus grounds — tenuous in the absence of excavation — for arguing that not only did Turlough O Connor build castles motte-like in function and morphology if influenced distinctively by the ringfort antecedent but so too perhaps did some of his vassals. If Normandy is a sufficient analogue most of these would have been no earlier than the 12th century.

A further if extreme example of the problems created by the axiomatic equation of mound and Norman is provided by the motte-and-bailey at Cloonburren, Co. Roscommon, one of the very few such earthworks west of the Shannon. While this can be linked hypothetically with any one of several Norman incursions in the early 13th century,³⁸ the solitary documentary association is a reference of 1226 which shows that it was an O Connor castle garrisoned by Leinster mercenaries.³⁹ While this demonstrates no more than Irish use of a motte in an area from which Norman settlement was excluded after 1215 by Crown policy aimed at containing the O Connors within the King's five cantreds west of the Shannon, there is no evidence to place Cloonburren specifically within a Norman provenance. The alternative is to invoke the relatively familiar notion of Irish construction of mottes, advanced originally by Orpen⁴⁰ and revived more recently by McNeill, to explain the post-1169 distribution of the earthworks in Ulster.⁴¹ In turn this can be paralleled by events in Galloway where mottes were being constructed by the Scottish nobility after 1185.⁴² But we must admit the probability that in Ireland this was a continuation of pre-invasion practice.

A final point to be considered here stems from King and Alcock's observation that raths would be classified as ringworks if they occurred in England.⁴³ In Ireland, conversely, earthworks constructed as morphological and ideological ringworks — defensive in nature and feudal in function — may be classified as ringforts because we do not possess a classification scheme which is sufficiently discerning for this ubiquitous but enigmatic settlement form. It is commonplace to argue that mottes were often constructed upon — or even inside — pre-existing ringforts but in England, the replacement of ringworks with mottes is an ordinary enough phenomenon. It is thus possible that the motte at Lorrha, Co. Tipperary, which began with the construction of a ring-bank, represents just such an occurrence,⁴⁴ one which is paralleled by Pollardstown, Co. Kildare where Fanning believes that a ringwork may have been the first construction, replaced later by a motte-and-bailey.⁴⁵ The ring-feature at Pollardstown was post-1169 but that at Lorrha was of uncertain date which provokes the tentative hypothesis that the Normans might sometimes have used not ringforts but Gaelic ringworks as the basis for their castles. Was for example

the 'enclosure' at Duneight, Co. Down — a place-name which suggests something more than a mere rath — which in turn became the bailey of the Norman motte, a ringfort or an Irish ringwork?⁴⁶ Again, the Dún-na-nGall attacked by Murchertach, son of Niall Lochlainn in 1159⁴⁷ was identified by Knox as an earthen and stone site at Ballynacarrach, Co. Mayo.⁴⁸ He described this as roughly square with round corners and a wall up to 9 ft thick and 6 ft high, separated from the hillside on which it stands by a deep ditch crossed by a causeway. The term ringwork describes this feature more accurately than ringfort.

The significance of such questions lies in the association of private castle with feudalism. If overlordship promoted a hierarchy of vassalage in pre-Norman Ireland, then there must have been many more fortresses than those few known to have been built by kings such as Turlough O Connor and his son Rory. Some may have been ringworks — distinguished from ringforts by their conceptual context — and some platform raths which in turn functioned socially and economically as mottes. There are indeed occasional annalistic references to sites identified by the term *caislen* which do not appear to have been royal and may thus indicate some degree of development of the concept of the private feudal fortress. The men of Teftha burnt the *caislen* of Loch Cairrgin in 1136,⁴⁹ a site identified by O'Donovan as Ardnakillen Lough, Co. Roscommon⁵⁰ and again the *caislen* of Cuileantrach (Cullentrach, Co. Meath) was burned and demolished by Rory O Connor in 1155.⁵¹ Further, Ó Corráin in discussing the annalistic evidence from Munster believed that the pattern of warfare was changing as early as the 11th century to one in which permanently-garrisoned fortifications played a major role. One major step forward would be to attempt to equate the *dún* placenames listed in the *Annals of Innisfallen* for 995 and 1012 with extant field monuments although these would pre-date the innovational context demonstrated by the adoption of *caislen* in the 12th century.⁵² A possible example — although a royal one — is provided by Beal Boru, Co. Clare, the Bóruma razed by the Connachtmén in 1118 when 'they hurled it in the Shannon, both stone and timber'. Although classified by its excavator as a ringfort, Beal Boru conceptually may well be a feudal ringwork, the primary bank of the 11th century possessing an internal stone revetment and an external palisade of wood.⁵³

POST-INVASION TIMBER AND EARTHEN FORTIFICATIONS

As a generalization, a considerable majority of the documentary citations concerning post-invasion castles in eastern Ireland can be equated with extant or known destroyed mottes or with later stone castles. A number of undocumented mottes have also been identified through field survey, the most common locational attribute being their juxtaposition to medieval churches. Few references relate to ringworks although several — such as Pollardstown, Co. Kildare — have been discovered through the excavation of supposed ringforts. Barry in assessing the evidence for ringworks considered that several very early Norman castles belonged to this category, a conclusion analogous with events elsewhere. One of these was Ferrycarrig, Co. Wexford, described by Giraldus Cambrensis as 'a most ill-fortified castle, which was enclosed by a flimsy wall of branches and sods'.⁵⁴ The earliest

Norman fortification in Ireland was that built by Raymond le Gros at Dundunnolf (Baginbun) near Waterford. Giraldus refers to this as a *castrum* but again describes it as a 'flimsy fortification of branches and sods' although it did have gates.⁵⁵ In one of the Irish sources, it is referred to by the Gaelic *daingean* — most unusually because *caislen* is employed almost invariably to refer to Norman castles;⁵⁶ this does suggest that it was not regarded as an innovation.

Notwithstanding such evidence of ringwork features being used as early campaign castles, a documentary search does not invalidate the traditional stance that the motte is a discriminating indicator of Norman settlement in eastern Ireland, excepting of course Ulster where the complication of post-invasion Irish construction is at its most prevalent. Certainly in Meath, for example, mottes can be associated with the processes of land granting carried out in the Norman subinfeudation.⁵⁷ Elsewhere in Ireland, however, it is clear that Norman colonization was much more intensive than is indicated by the occurrence of these earthworks.

MUNSTER

Innumerable documentary citations, notably in the *Annals of Innisfallen*, record the construction of Norman castles in Cork and Kerry, an area, however, in which generally the motte is absent. A particular problem is that few references can be equated with earthworks, continuity of function and site throughout the Middle Ages ensuring that extant remains are often those of later stone castles. For instance the stump at Timoleague, Co. Cork, is probably 15th — or even 16th — century but stands presumably on the site on Henry Butler's castle, captured by Dermot McCarthy in 1219.⁵⁸ Again, other early castles around Kenmare can no longer be traced. One such is Dunkerron, Co. Kerry, where the construction of the substantial 15th-century stone keep has eradicated any previous evidence. Further, some 13th-century castles have disappeared entirely. A whole series of Norman castles was built in the valley of the River Maine c. 1215, constructed as Orpen argued as a defensive screen along the frontier between Desmond and Kerry.⁵⁹ But only one, a completely overgrown motte-and-bailey at Molahiffe, Co. Kerry, is extant, juxtaposed with the ruins of a medieval church. There is also a stone castle stump on a natural ridge south of the Maine at Cloonmelane where a further castle was built c. 1215. Orpen stated that this appears to have been a motte, a conclusion which cannot be substantiated by field observation.⁶⁰

The motte-and-bailey at Molahiffe is very much the exception in Cork and Kerry. Certainly, the early castles of Munster erected in the 1190s such as Kilfeakle and Knockgraffon, both in Co. Tipperary, were indeed mottes and it is noteworthy that although relatively few in number in comparison to the plenitude in eastern Ireland, these were substantial fortifications. Thus they may have differed functionally from many of those in Leinster and Ulster which were by contrast small, very local and of minimal strategic significance; most are classified as mottes on morphology alone. Assuming a post-invasion dating, they may have been constructed simply as very temporary fortifications or even status symbols in the early years after 1169, an attenuated motte form acting as a useful differentiation from the ubiquitous ringfort.

The evidence from SW. Ireland hints — no more — at a chronological replacement of the motte by the ringwork around the beginning of the 13th century. While the latter — arguably — was used from the very earliest days of the invasion, mottes appear to have been dominant in the east of the island. However, in so far as documentary references can be equated with extant earthworks in Cork and Kerry, almost all relate — with the notable exception of Molahiffe — to ringworks of some form. Indeed one of the very few mottes listed by Glasscock in this area — that at Rathbarry, Co. Cork — is in fact a ringwork with attached bailey or annexe (although the site is impossible to survey as it is covered by an impenetrable thicket of bamboo!).⁶¹ Twohig has also described the ring-earthwork at Dunnamark, Co. Cork where the castle was burned by the McCarthys and Desmonds in 1261.⁶² Interestingly, both it and the motte at Molahiffe are referred to by the word *caislen* in the annals, demonstrating its functional as distinct from morphological meaning. There was a castle at Killorglin, Co. Kerry in 1234, presumably the one burnt by the Desmumu in 1261; obviously it was rebuilt for the castle was razed and the settlement burnt in 1280. Yet again it must have been reconstructed for in 1291 the castle and *vill* were granted to Thomas FitzMaurice by Thomas de Clare.⁶³ This cycle of destruction and rebuilding suggests an earthwork and to the E. of the bridge at Killorglin is a large, partly-destroyed ringfort; significantly, nearby is a ruined medieval church.

At several sites, later stone castles stand inside ring-earthworks. One of the best examples is Castlemore Barrett, Co. Cork where the ruins of a 15th-century stone tower are attached to a 13th-century hall keep. The castle is on a spur and is partly surrounded by a wide circular fosse. On the SSE. side, no ditch is required because of a fall of slope — perhaps part-natural, part-scarped — while to the SSW. the fosse disappears; presumably this access point to the castle was protected. Rahinanne, Co. Kerry is one of the sites listed as a possible ringwork by Barry.⁶⁴ This is a large circular enclosure — which obviously could be no more than a re-used ringfort — surrounded by a deep fosse and containing a 15th-century stone tower. At Aghadoe, Co. Kerry, the 13th-century round keep of Parkavonear Castle stands inside a roughly rectilinear moated enclosure — approximately 30 m x 38 m — which may represent the earliest fortification; given the location and dating of the stone castle, this would not be classified as a moated site. Finally, several of the early 13th-century castles of Cork and Kerry could be classified as ringworks because they were sited on coastal promontories, cut off from the mainland by fosses and earthen walls. These included Dún Deide (Dundeedy) on the tip of Galley Head, burnt in 1259 and perhaps Dún-na-nGall on Ringagroy Island.

CONNACHT

The evidence from Connacht, which is very much more substantial, also points strongly to a chronological replacement of the motte by the ringwork or — conversely — to a greater longevity of the latter. It must be reiterated that a progression of events such as this is at variance with the analogous evidence from

England and Normandy although Spurgeon and Thomas have suggested that, while mottes were the primary military settlements in 11th-century Glamorgan, they were replaced by ringworks in the 13th.⁶⁵ Whether or not the ringwork was constructed in Ireland from the 12th century onwards, it is clear that by the time of the effective Norman settlement of Connacht after 1235, mottes were no longer favoured. Orpen, commenting upon their absence in the W., observed that 'mote' placenames generally referred to ditches — usually rectilinear — of later date than the first occupation.⁶⁶

Nevertheless, a few sporadic instances attest to a limited retention of the form or to earlier attempts at colonization. The example at Cloonburren in S. Roscommon has already been discussed and there is a further — if utterly undocumented — motte-and-bailey in the same area at Castle Naghten; if this was Norman it was associated presumably with the routeway between the royal castles of Athlone and Rindown.⁶⁷ One of the best known if again undocumented mottes in Connacht is that at Rathdoony More, Co. Sligo, an impressive fortification standing about 8 m above the esker from which in part it is scarped. Claffey argued that this was the castle of Ath-in-Gail,⁶⁸ erected by MacWilliam Burk in 1265 and demolished by Aedh O Connor in 1270.⁶⁹ While the nearby stone castle of Ballymote was indisputably a De Burgh fortress, built c. 1300, several major inconsistencies remain in Claffey's attribution. The *Annals of Connacht* place Ath-in-Gail on the Owenmore River near Templehouse Lake to the W. of Rathdoony More, a location consistent with the 'ath' (ford) element of the place-name.⁷⁰ Again, a curious feature of the motte is the gangway or ramp which crosses the ditch to the bailey. Knox observed that this was a feature of Gaelic origin⁷¹ and much more recently, this conclusion has been reiterated both by Lynn in his analyses of Ulster platform raths and Stout in her discussion of earthworks in the Barony of Ikerrin, Co. Tipperary.⁷² Finally, 1263 is late — exceedingly so — for a motte. According to McNeill, the defences of Twescard in Ulster, occupied by the Normans in the 1230s and 1240s, were based upon mottes which thus became obsolete after c. 1250. Elsewhere, the motte erected at Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, c. 1215, is commonly held to be the last attested example of construction.⁷³ So again, the motte at Rathdoony More illustrates the problems inherent in the automatic attribution of this type of settlement to a Norman provenance in the absence of corroborating documentary evidence.

In turn, the dangers of morphological attribution are demonstrated by the supposed motte (and national monument) at Gortlowan, Co. Sligo, which may well be a natural fluvial feature. A further motte-like mound listed by Orpen can be found at Ramore, Co. Sligo although in this area it could equally be a tumulus of some form.⁷⁴ At Scurmore, again in Co. Sligo, a small motte 3 m high with a summit only 10 m across is sited within a continuous enclosing bank and ditch. It occupies a very commanding location despite its diminutive dimensions and may represent the adaptation of a ringfort. Again, however, given the absence of a corroborating documentary context, the provenance of the feature is unverifiable.

Knox believed that in this virtual absence of the classic motte type, the Normans favoured what he termed the 'flat mote' type in Connacht. Amongst these he included Bohola, Co. Mayo, and Toberkyrky at Tulsk, Co. Roscommon.⁷⁵ These

are both platform raths and, as we have seen, the Ulster exemplars imply pre-Norman dating. Certainly, none of the late 12th- and 13th-century English documentary citations to castles in western Ireland relate to this type of earthwork, further evidence that they were Irish in origin. Knox — falling into a trap which no doubt all later researchers have followed — also proved a little too ready in his identifications of mottes. Amongst these were Tulsk where the ‘mote’ is no more than the footings of a later stone castle combined with some stream erosion. Again, despite the tradition that the priory is built on the site of a De Barry manor house, there is no field evidence now for Ballyhaunis Priory ‘Mote’, the lynchpin of Knox’s argument for a Norman military colony in E. Mayo. This depended upon the assumption that the rectangular earthworks which he observed around Ballyhaunis were Norman in origin. However, many examples of this type of settlement in neighbouring Roscommon are located in areas which can be shown — definitively — never to have experienced Norman occupation.⁷⁶

Discussion of ringworks in an Irish context is beset by insuperable problems above and beyond its simple morphological affinity with the ringfort. For instance, as Cronin observed, many examples of the latter were reused in the attempted Elizabethan colonization of Roscommon which means that impressive earthworks of a military nature may have nothing to do with medieval settlement.⁷⁷ How widespread such practices were cannot be ascertained but given the resultant scope for chronological and morphological confusion, virtually no ringwork can be identified without qualification, even in the presence of documentary evidence. However, despite the inevitable degree of supposition involved, a majority of recorded fortresses in Connacht which can possibly be equated with extant field monuments appear to be either ringworks of some form or else stone castles. In function, many of the ringworks were synonymous with the large mottes of eastern Ireland, military in nature and permanently garrisoned. Thus one would not dispute Knox’s observation that a strong castle was built in each great fee in Connacht; many, however, in the 13th century were of timber and earth and not as he asserted of stone.⁷⁸

One site which displays clearly the level of supposition involved and thus the severe limitations of morphological analysis is Dundonnell, Co. Roscommon. Ostensibly, this is a large ringfort with a bank — 5 m high — surrounded by a deep and wide fosse and an outer bank. The interior, which contains the ruins of a 17th-century fortified house, is almost 50 m in diameter (Fig. 2). In 1236, a castle, known variously as Onagh, Mayllonach or Muille Uanach, was founded by the Crown to protect the routeway running W. from the Shannon bridges at Athlone.⁷⁹ The castle remained in royal hands and although ‘destroyed’ by Aedh O Connor in 1270, there was still a Norman settlement around it in the late 13th century.⁸⁰ O’Donovan identified the site as Owenagh in S. Roscommon but there are no earthworks or castles in that townland nor were any recorded on the First Edition Ordnance Survey Six-Inch maps of c.1840.⁸¹ Dundonnell, very military in appearance (and similar to the site at Rahinanne, Co. Kerry, discussed above) is however in an adjoining townland and while this is by no means proof positive that it was the

ringwork castle of Mayllonach, the possibility remains a real one. In addition, Knox described three castles in Mayo — Ballykine, Ballisnahiney and Castlelucas — which have a morphology similar to Rahinanne and Dundonnell of stone castles set inside circular forts.⁸² Barry suggested that in such instances the later tower houses may have been built on the sites of the original gate towers of ringwork castles.⁸³ Morphologically, of course, all these instances could represent no more than the reuse of ringforts as ready-made earthen or stone bawns.

A number of further instances of possible ringworks can be isolated in Connaught. The castle of Buninna (Bunfinne), Co. Sligo, which was first recorded in 1249 — although the date of construction was earlier — was destroyed in 1310 and its town spoiled; the constable of the castle, Thomas McWalter, had been killed two years before.⁸⁴ The extant earthwork, 40 m in diameter with a bank averaging over 2 m in height, is very possibly a ringwork, separated from a bailey-like feature by a substantial fosse; faced stone is visible at a gap in the bank on the northern side (Fig. 2). In the same cantred is Ardree (Rath-aird-Craibhe) where the castle was destroyed by Aedh O Connor in 1265.⁸⁵ The extant earthwork is a degraded and indistinct circular feature but in the 19th century O'Rourke described it as having an interior diameter of 100 ft which rose to 141 ft when the deep fosse was included; these dimensions are not dissimilar to those of Buninna.⁸⁶ A further degraded earthwork stands on the end of a spur overlooking the Dominican friary at Burrishoole, Co. Mayo, a borough burnt with its castle (Umhall) in 1247 by Turlough O Connor; the castle was again burned by the Irish during an English counter-attack in 1248.⁸⁷ This earthwork has a bank 3 m high on its western side and an interior diameter averaging 22 m; presumably it was the earliest fortification at Burrishoole, for the decayed remains of a later tower house stand downslope on the water's edge. Finally, reference has already been made to the lost castle of Ath-in-Gail, Co. Sligo, equated by Claffey with the motte at Rathdoony More. However, beside the Owenmore River just W. of its egress from Templehouse Lake is a substantial ellipsoidal earthwork, 50 m in diameter N-S. across the interior and 25 m E-W.; it has a bank in excess of 2 m in height with much stone in its outer face which in turn is surrounded by a wide (7 m) if now shallow fosse. The site commands the river crossing at the outlet of the lake, a location which is the most persuasive evidence that might link the earthwork with Ath-in-Gail. In all these cases, however, it must be emphasized most strongly that excavation alone could substantiate the claim that these earthworks represent ringworks as distinct from ringforts.

Another simpler variant of the ringwork to identify concerns those instances where fosses were used to enclose small promontories or spurs. At Castleconor, Co. Sligo, for example, a fosse and wall isolate a small headland on the estuary of the R. Moy. A gatehouse stands in the centre of the wall, protecting a stone keep of uncertain date. Orpen believed that this was the castle of Piers de Bermingham and that, like Buninna and Ardree, the earliest castle was established sometime before 1250.⁸⁸ Whether or not the extant stone features are original or even contemporary with each other, it is difficult to conceive that the layout of the site ever took another form (Fig. 3). A very similar fortification is Castlecarr, Co. Mayo, where the first castle was erected by Adam de Staunton in 1238 on the shores of Lough Carra.⁸⁹

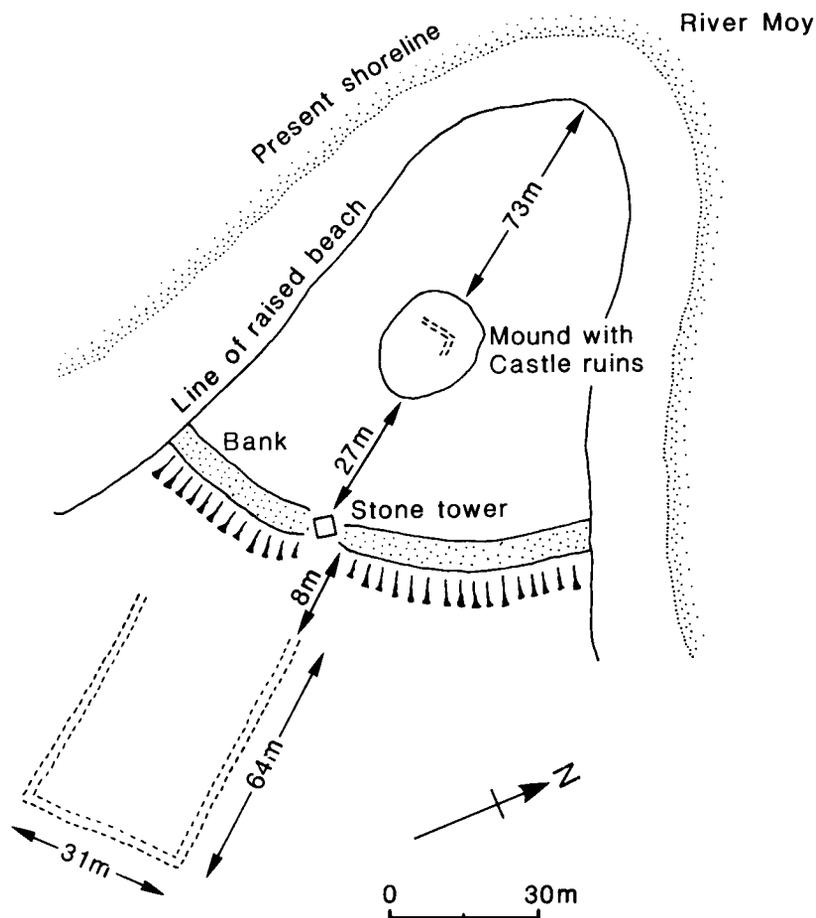


FIG. 3

Castleconor, Co. Sligo: an example of a promontory ringwork

While the extant ruins are of a 15th-century tower standing inside a fortified bawn, the fosse cutting off the headland may well represent the original fortress. A further hybrid ringwork and stone castle is that at Lough Mannin, Co. Mayo where a fosse with a gatehouse isolates a promontory on which is sited what is almost certainly an early round keep. One further instance of this variant of ringwork is Rindown, Co. Roscommon, where the enormous royal stone castle, begun in 1227 by Geoffrey de Marisco, is cut off from its peninsula on Lough Ree by a fosse, located just W. of the keep.⁹⁰ This feature may pre-date that structure although it could in fact be pre-Norman, given the place-name's *dún* suffix.

One final element in the evidence concerning the nature of garrisoned fortresses in Connacht is that the layout of several stone castles points to ringwork precursors. The best example is Ballylahan, Co. Mayo, where the curious geometry of a curtain wall and gate-house standing on a raised bank is very reminiscent of a ringwork; this

certainly is a more likely explanation than Knox's idea that it was a ringfort.⁹¹ Leask believed the curtain wall to be earlier than the gateway which he dated to after 1260.⁹² The castle was the *caput* of Jordan d'Exeter and must originate from the 1240s. A parallel is Adare Castle, Co. Limerick, again once thought to have been built on a rath. However, as Rynne has argued, it is much more likely that the structure is entirely Anglo-Norman.⁹³ A further analogue may be the castle at Seafin, Co. Down, which ostensibly appears to be the re-fortification of a hill-top ringfort.⁹⁴ Knox also believed that the castle of Banada, Co. Sligo, which is said to have had seven towers, might well have been similar to Ballylahan. This was demolished by Aedh O Connor in 1270 and the site is now occupied by a monastery.⁹⁵

In all the Connacht examples alluded to, it can be argued that some form of ringwork occurs wherever a castle established after 1235 can tentatively be identified. Thus the evidence — deficient as it is — cumulatively points to the ringwork acting as a garrisoned stronghold and thus being synonymous in function with, but later in date than, the motte-and-bailey. Slender evidence, conversely, does point to several possible instances of ringworks being constructed as campaign castles. The Irish equivalent of this was the *longphort*, a term which had lost its original connotation of 'ship-harbour' and was used commonly in the 12th-century annals to refer to temporary encampments or winter quarters. The very first Norman settlement at Cork, made in 1177 by Muircheartach, son of Domhnall McCarthy, Miles de Cogan and Raymond FitzStephen was one such *longphort*.⁹⁶

Similar evidence concerns Roscommon where the Normans made a number of forays in the late 12th and early 13th centuries without effecting permanent settlements. In 1202, for instance, a force led by William de Burgh arrived at the Cistercian abbey of Boyle. The annals record that he began to build a stone wall 'round the great stone house of the guests', two days work being devoted to its erection.⁹⁷ Although it is unclear if the construction was completed, this appears to be possible documentary confirmation of the building of a ringwork as a campaign castle. In the previous year, De Burgh's force had passed through Oran, Co. Roscommon where there is a ring earthwork, 36 m in diameter with a bailey on the western side (Fig. 2). This has been identified incorrectly as a motte-and-bailey⁹⁸ and while the site may be no more than a ringfort with an annexe, it may indeed represent the use of a ringwork as a campaign fortification.⁹⁹ The problem remains of course that if adequate documentary corroboration is not forthcoming, it is very difficult to verify the nature of earthworks, which may have possessed only the most transitory value.

CONCLUSIONS

It has been emphasized in the text that particular difficulties attend the discussion of medieval timber and earthwork castles in Ireland because of the increasing ineffectiveness of orthodox morphological classifications. Further, the ethnic assumptions implicit in the supposition that 1169 — the date of the initial Norman invasion — acts as a 'changeover' point in these systems, are invalidated if

Irish society is held to have been developing a feudal structure as early perhaps as the 10th century. If this argument is sustained, the corollary is clear; private castles should have been relatively commonplace features in Ireland before the invasion although it must be emphasized that most documentary citations are to royal strongholds. It is in this context that research on platform raths is so vital. In turn the analogous geographical context of Normandy and the British Isles must provide pointers to the nature and chronology of these fortresses. It is suggested here — although the circumstantial nature of the evidence is freely admitted — that some so-called platform raths can be explained more adequately as pre-invasion mottes, their particular broad shape being no more than a local expression of a general process, explicable by conversion from or the influence of ringfort morphology. The word motte is used to emphasize the conceptual context of these earthworks. There is no reason to suppose that they would have been abandoned at the invasion. Further, if we adopt a policy of documentary corroboration in attributing earthworks to particular social contexts and relax simultaneously the equation of mound with Norman, some mottes — including Rathdoony More and perhaps Cloonburren — are probably Gaelic if post-invasion. It is possible that the ringwork form of feudal fortress was also favoured in pre-Norman Ireland but the issue is confused hopelessly by the morphological similarity with the ringfort.

Unfortunately, that same confusion permeates too the assessment of the role of ringworks after the invasion. Nevertheless, the evidence from western Ireland points to the clear conclusion that mottes went out of favour soon after 1200, a substantiation in fact of the traditional opinion advanced by Leask.¹⁰⁰ Wherever documentary references can be equated with likely earthworks, the result is generally — if not invariably — some type of ringwork. Exceptions do occur such as the Norman motte-and-bailey built *c.*1215 at Molahiffe, Co. Kerry. There are two explanations for this preponderance of ringworks in the west, a characteristic which accounts, of course, for that peculiar easterly bias in the distribution of mottes. First, there may have been a variation in the longevity of the two types or, conversely, the ringwork may have been the chronological successor to the motte; the evidence favours the latter view. In eastern Ireland, ringworks such as Ferrycarrig or Pollardstown and Lorrha were either early and very temporary encampments associated with the Norman invasion or were precursors to mottes. McNeill argued too that in Ulster the ringwork functioned as a campaign castle. There may have been a few exceptions such as Castletobin, Co. Kilkenny, but field and documentary evidence both point to a preponderance of mottes in eastern Ireland.¹⁰¹ Although the evidence has still to be assessed fully, a large majority of the documentary references to Norman castles in Leinster — in contradistinction to Munster and Connacht — can be equated with mottes.

In western Ireland, particularly in those areas colonized after 1200, the converse occurs. The ringwork — in its several variants — dominates as the garrisoned fortification, synonymous in function and status with the motte. The contrast to this generalization is Ulster where McNeill argued for a continuation of motte building until *c.*1250. Elsewhere, it is unclear why the ringwork should have succeeded the motte in this fashion. Possibly, the later form was favoured in the early

years after the invasion for reasons of symbolism and status in order to differentiate between the Norman castle and the Gaelic ringfort. Again, military fashion may have swung in favour of the ringwork and there is some evidence from S. Wales — the region from which many of the Norman leaders in Ireland originated — that the ringwork was the common timber and earthwork fortification of the 13th century. Thus, tentatively, the ringwork may have been used in Ireland as a temporary encampment from the earliest days of Norman settlement but after *c.* 1200 it began — in its several variants — to succeed the motte as the ubiquitous Norman garrisoned castle.

This discussion makes it clear that more discerning, more flexible and above all less ethnically dominated classification systems are required for Irish earthworks. Two final instances are proffered — in a sense — as symbols of this plea. One is the construction of a crannog — an artificial island settlement always regarded as Gaelic — by the Anglo-Normans under Walter de Lacy at Inis Laodhachain in 1223.¹⁰² The other is a bizarre earthwork at Tulrohan, Co. Mayo, where a rectangular raised platform 30 m by 35 m is separated from a further semi-circular platform by a fosse 6 m wide; both average 3.5 m above the surrounding ground level. On the rectangular platform is what can only be called a 'motelet', 2 m high with a summit diameter of 7 m. Simply, the earthwork — probably medieval and the result of someone's idiosyncratic interpretation of both Gaelic and Norman ideas on earthwork fortifications — is unclassifiable.

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