PROBLEMS OF IRISH RING-FORTS

Michael J. O'Kelly

The term 'ring-fort' is a misnomer. Some of the sites it purports to describe are not rings and the vast majority of them are not forts even in a very mild military sense. Why then is it used—why do we not find a better term straight off? Because nomenclature is the first problem which one encounters on entering upon a study of these very numerous structures in Ireland.

Long ago, T. J. Westropp counted the ring-forts marked on the six-inch sheets of the Irish Ordnance Survey and produced the remarkable figure of 30,000. Others have suggested that there are over 40,000. While these figures give an indication of the order of size of the ring-fort problem in Ireland, it must be borne in mind that they are very much in the nature of estimates. The Ordnance Surveyors of the 1840's recognised very many antiquities and surveyed them on to the maps, but they missed sites here and there. On occasions too, natural features were mistaken for antiquities and surveyed in, while on other occasions, genuine antiquities which are not ring-forts, were shown on the maps with the ring-fort conventional sign. Large numbers of sites have been ploughed down long ago, and often these are visible now only on aerial photographs. It is very difficult therefore to get an accurate count of the ring-forts of Ireland.

Including old and recent excavations, it is doubtful if one hundred sites have been adequately examined; and a hundred sites out of 30,000 is a poor statistical sample, especially as almost every excavation has produced appreciable differences of structural detail. As yet an acceptable common denominator has not emerged and hence the vague term—in fact wrong term—ring-fort is probably as good as, if not better than, any other at the present time. When more work has been done we may get to know enough to enable us to abandon it in favour of some more exact term. Is the name 'round pound' as used for certain sites on Dartmoor any better? These sites can also be considered to be ring-forts! In the Irish language literature ring-forts are referred to under a variety of names such as *ráth*, anglicised to rath; *lios*; *dún*; *daingean*; *caiseal*; *cathair*, and probably there are others. Unfortunately the early Irish writers did not give technical descriptions of the different types of site. They are mentioned in passing only, and by names which it was assumed were understood by all. These words survive too, as elements in innumerable place-names throughout Ireland.[1]

The Reverend Professor Shaw of University College, Dublin, has made a study of the contexts of these words *ráth*, *lios*, *dún*, etc., with interesting results.[2] For instance the context of *ráth* shows that it was always dug. This must mean that a ditch was dug and the material from it was thrown up to form the bank. The word *lios* apparently meant the space enclosed by the *ráth*. The *teach*, that is the house, was a free-standing structure in the *lios*.

There is something to be said in favour of using the word *ráth* as a general term instead of ring-fort and this may yet be done. Indeed some of our colleagues in Northern Ireland have already used the word in this way. It is also used to describe comparable structures in Pembrokeshire. But there are difficulties.

Ring-forts which on surface indications appeared to be simple earthen structures have been shown by excavation to have had built stone facings to the bank inside and out. Others have had a stone facing inside and a wooden facing or palisade of close-set posts outside; and there have been such wooden facings inside and out. The word *ráth* will not really convey anything more of these variants than will the term ring-fort. Unfortunately too, the late G. Bersu used the term *ráth* to describe his completely roofed over ring-forts like those at Ballakeigan and Ballanorris in the Isle of Man[5] and like his Lissue[4] in Co. Antrim. Even if his interpretations of the evidence at these sites is correct, this is a very rare type of structure and does not fit in at all with the original Irish meaning of the term *ráth*.

The terms *dún* and *daingean* appear to have been applied to more strongly built structures usually having stone or stone-faced ramparts—for instance *Dún Aongusa* on the Arran Islands (*Plate* VII) or the promontory fort of *Dún Beag* in Kerry, both impressively built of stone.

The terms *caiseal* and *cathair* generally refer to structures which also appear to be built entirely of stone. The sites so named seem to occur in important numbers in the areas where stone was the most readily available building material. Though some of them are impressively built, the majority are as unimpressive as the majority of other kinds of ring-forts.

Ó Ríordáin excavated Circles J, K and L at Lough Gur in Co. Limerick and found that these structures were domestic enclosures and not ritual stone circles as had been thought. Circle K is dated to the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age overlap period; the primary period at J has a C14 date of 2,600 B.C. These enclosed habitation sites can be regarded as ring-forts.

At Carrigillihy in Co. Cork I have excavated an Early Bronze Age ring-fort.[6] The enclosing element here was a strongly built stone wall laid out to an oval plan and fitted with a gate the post-holes for the jambs of which were found. Within was a stone-built house also of oval plan. Dating evidence here was a mixture of flat-based coarse ware and sherds of round-bottomed bowl accompanied by a copper awl.

At Cush, Co. Limerick, Ó Ríordáin excavated a group of conjoined ring-forts.[7] One of them, Ring 5, contained five burials two of which were accompanied by Late Bronze Age urns. Burial no. 1 had a cordoned urn and was associated with a burnt soil layer and charcoal deposit which extended over and partly filled a souterrain. The souterrain and its associated houses had gone out of use before the ring-fort had been used as a cemetery. On this evidence, Ó Ríordáin argued that Ring 5 was at latest of Late Bronze Age date. The same ring-fort, however, produced twelve rotary querns of late type ordinarily found in Ireland in Early Christian contexts or later. One quern was in the souterrain filling. There is a conflict of evidence here which has not been resolved. Up to the end, Ó Ríordáin believed in the late Bronze Age date he had given to the early phase of the site, but most other workers have rejected his arguments and consider the ring-forts to be no earlier than

PLATE VII. Aerial view of Dún Aongusa, Arran Islands, Co. Galway
(photograph by J. K St. Joseph: copyright reserved, Cambridge University Collection)

the Iron Age at the earliest. It is thought that Ring 5 was accidentally built on a cemetery of late Bronze Age burials, as was shown to have been the case at the ring-fort of Letterkeen, Co. Mayo.[8]

Dr. Raftery excavated the Rath of Feerwore in Co. Galway.[9] The Iron Age Turoe Stone formerly stood beside the site and hence the reason for excavating it. The results were disappointingly meagre but were considered sufficient to indicate an Iron Age date of between 100 B.C. and A.D. 100.

Ó Ríordáin excavated two large ring-forts in Co. Cork, at Garranes[10] and Ballycatteen.[11] These were impressive multi-vallate sites, each of them having three banks and ditches and thus they are unusual amongst the majority of ring-forts. Garranes is reliably dated to about A.D. 500 by the presence of post-Roman pottery which included some red ware and many sherds of *amphorae* of eastern Mediterranean origin. There was also a quantity of domestic 'E-ware' which probably originated in France. The site appears to have been occupied only by a group of craftsmen in bronze, enamel and glass. While the entrance had had at least three gates, there was no evidence that the site had had any military significance.

Ballycatteen, similarly sited on a ridge was probably of somewhat later date, perhaps about A.D. 600. The E-ware was present but there were no red-wares or *amphorae*. Evidence of occupation was slight, though three souterrains were found. The entrance had had three gates, but there was no evidence of military activity or intent.

At Garryduff, on the east side of Cork Harbour, I excavated two ring-forts.[12] One small site, 75 feet in internal diameter, had a dominating situation on the shoulder of a hill. It had a rock-cut ditch and a rampart faced with stone inside and out. As well as a strong wooden gate, it may also have had a wooden tower above the opening. The intensive occupation was entirely domestic—no war-like gear of any kind. On the contrary, arts and crafts were constantly practised as indicated by the trial pieces, by the crucibles and by the remains of furnaces etc. The date in this case was seventh-eighth century A.D. The post Roman E-ware was present in quantity, but there were no *amphorae*.

The second fort immediately beside this was larger and more impressive in its high rampart, stone-faced inside and out and in its very strongly-made entrance. There was a deep rock-cut ditch. No trace of occupation of any kind was found within it and it may therefore have been no more than a cattle pen.

Cahercommaun, a great multivallate stone fort in Co. Clare,[13] excavated by Hencken, was shown to date to the eighth-ninth century A.D. This remarkable structure with its three stone ramparts stands on a cliff-edge in a bleak territory, but one which, nevertheless, provides good grazing for cattle (*Plate* VIII).

All its features both of siting and structural detail remind us of the spectacular Dún Aongusa on Arran Mór. T. F. O'Rahilly argued that this was built by his P-Celtic Érainn people of late Hallstatt origin.[14] These, he said, had been driven westward across Ireland by the La Tène Iron Age people, the Laigin, who had come from West Britain into the east of Ireland. If O'Rahilly were right in holding that Dún Aongusa had been built by the Érainn, then its date should lie in the third century B.C. or so. It seems to me more likely that Dún Aongusa is of the same date as Cahercommaun, that is eighth-ninth century A.D.

PLATE VIII. Aerial view of Cahercommaun, Co. Clare
(photograph by J. K. St. Joseph: copyright reserved, Cambridge University Collection)

What then of the Grianán of Aileach in Donegal, or of Staigue fort in Co. Kerry? The Grianán has a commanding hill-top position, and it stands within a hill-fort the earthen bank of which follows the contour of the hill. The stone rampart has been restored in its upper part, but most of the structure is original. Its inner face is terraced and there are numerous stairways leading to the wall-top. There is no evidence of date.

Staigue is very similar, except that it has an external ditch and it is not enclosed within a hill fort. It stands at the head of a glen which runs down to the sea, but it is surrounded by higher ground from which it can be overlooked on three sides. Its stone rampart is 18 feet high in parts and like the Grianán, is terraced on the inside and has numerous stairways to the wall top. There is no date for this either.

Ó Ríordáin excavated a stone fort at Leacanabuaile near Caherciveen, Co. Kerry.[15] This, though smaller than Staigue or the Grianán, has many of the same features—the terraced inner face to the bank, stairways on the inner face as well as a closely similar style of masonry. There were a number of houses inside built of stone, some circular and some rectangular in plan. The walls were partly corbelled but the roofs were finished in thatch. The finds suggested to Ó Ríordáin a date in the early Christian Period, but one item, an iron arrowhead, may well mean a post-Norman date. And Staigue and the Grianán may well be as late!

Certain sites have had Norman mottes built over them. A number of such have been examined in the North of Ireland.[16] I have excavated one such site in the South, Beal Boru in Co. Clare. It lies on the bank of the River Shannon just at the outfall from Lough Derg near Killaloe.[17] In this case the primary structure was a ring-fort, the bank of which had been built of gravel excavated from an external ditch. The bank had an inner facing of dry-built stone and an outer facing of close-set vertical timbers in palisade fashion. This primary site was effectively dated to the late eleventh century by two Hiberno-Norse silver pennies. This structure had been abandoned and had fallen into decay when the Normans began to build a motte over it. The tip-lines in the gravel of the motte show that its building was begun from the outside, the gravel being obtained from a great external ditch. The work was not finished and the central area remained as a bowl-shaped hollow. An entry in the Annals of Clonmacnoise for 1206 probably refers to this attempted motte-building.

Rynne has recently excavated two ring-forts near Shannon Airport.[18] All the surface indications suggested perfectly normal Early Christian Period structures. Excavation showed however that the ring-forts were constructed about A.D. 1600. There are of course other indications that the building of ring-forts went on for a long time after the Norman invasion, but these sites clinch the matter effectively.

To sum up—the Irish ring-fort may be an indigenous invention of late Neolithic times. Once invented, the type continued to be built down to the 17th century A.D., there being numerous variations in the details of construction. The ditch and bank of the *ráth* and the dry-built wall of the *caiseal* or *cathair* were little more than stack-yard enclosures around the house and animal shelters of a farming family. This pattern of isolated dwellings persists to the present day. Even the very impressive sites are not military structures—they are merely 'big houses' of the time, their snobbish owners manifesting their wealth by building great stone walls late in the Early Christian Period.

REFERENCES

1 MacAirt: 'County Armagh: toponymy and history' in *PICHC* (1955), pp. 1-5.
2 *ANL*, IV, No. 5 (Jan. 1952), 73.
3 Bersu: *JMM*, V (1945-46), 1-6.
4 Bersu: *UJA*, X (1947), 30-58; XI (1948), 131-3.
5 Ó Ríordáin: *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside*, 3rd ed. (London, 1953), p. 3.
6 O'Kelly: *JCHAS*, LVI (1951), 69-86.
7 Ó Ríordáin: *PRIA*, XLV, C, (1940), 83-181.
8 Ó Ríordáin and MacDermott: *PRIA*, LIV, C, (1952), 89-119.
9 Raftery: *JRSAI*, LXXIV (1944), 23-52.
10 Ó Ríordáin: *PRIA*, XLVII, C, (1942), 77-150.
11 Ó Ríordáin and Hartnett: *PRIA*, XLIX, C, (1943), 1-43,
12 O'Kelly: *PRIA*, LXIII, C, (1962), 17-125.
13 Hencken: *Cahercommaun*, Extra Volume *RSAI*, for 1938, 1-82.
14 T. F. O'Rahilly: 'The Goidels and their Predecessors' in *PBA*, XXI (1935), 339-340.
15 Ó Ríordáin and Foy: *JCHAS*, XLVI (1941), 85-99.
16 Proudfoot: 'Further Excav. at Shaneen Park, Belfast' in *UJA*, XXI (1958), 18-38.
Waterman: 'Excav. at Ballyfounder Rath, Co. Down' in *UJA*, XXI (1958), 39-61.
Dickinson and Waterman: 'Excav. of a Rath with Motte at Castleskreen, Co. Down' in *UJA*, XXII (1959), 67-82.
Waterman: 'Piper's Fort, Farranfad, Co. Down' in *UJA*, XXII (1959), 83-87.
Waterman: 'Excav. at Lismahon, Co. Down' in *Med. Arch.*, III (1959), 139-176.
17 O'Kelly: *JCHAS*, LXVII (1962), 1-27.
18 Rynne: *PRIA*, LXIII, C, (1964), 245-277.