

MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENT ON THE GARRON PLATEAU OF NORTHERN IRELAND

A preliminary report

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There are particular difficulties for the study of landscapes of the historic period in Ireland. In many parts of the island the pattern of settlements, roads and fields was extensively remodelled in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (e.g. Currie 1976, 53). As a result, the current landscape provides very little guide to that of the medieval period. Some recent work has shown that in a few places some elements of the earlier pattern do survive (Duffy 2001, 123–25), but, even so, it has proved remarkably difficult to obtain any sense of what the earlier landscape might have been like. The prevailing view that little remains of the earlier historic landscape has tended to discourage archaeological landscape survey in Ireland, either north or south of the border, and consequently knowledge of the character of settlements and fields of the late medieval period is still very rudimentary.

The uplands and areas of poorer soils in Ireland, as in Britain, were not so widely affected by the remodelling of the landscape in the last three hundred years. It is to these areas, and particularly to those places where the hunger for land in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was less intense, that we need to turn to begin to understand the character of rural late medieval Ireland. It may be argued that medieval land-use of the uplands was not typical of that at lower elevations. This may be true, but since we know so little about the late medieval landscape, that can be only a supposition. The purpose of the present paper is to report preliminary work on parts of the Garron plateau, part of the Antrim uplands of Northern Ireland and discuss the features of the medieval landscape which are beginning to emerge from this work.

The Garron plateau is formed of basalt which overlies a bed of chalk. It rises very sharply from the narrow coastal strip so that in some places it forms a steep cliff. The coastal belt between the sea and the cliff varies between a few kilometres wide to only tens of metres. To the south of Garron Point on the north-east coast of Northern Ireland it is less than a kilometre, and to the west of the Point it is only a few hundred metres. The cliffs rise 150 to 200 metres in places above the coastal strip making the ascent to the upland of the plateau particularly difficult. There are similar problems in gaining access to the upland from the deep, U-shaped valley of Glenariff which bounds the study area to the west and south-west (Figs 1–3). The inaccessibility of the plateau has led to the preservation of a nearly pristine landscape. It is difficult to reach with agricultural machinery, or indeed with any vehicle,

and has largely escaped the effects of improvement and recent ploughing. As a result, the plateau above Garron comprises the largest area of blanket bog in Northern Ireland and is protected as an Area of Special Scientific Interest for its wildlife.

The character of vegetation on the plateau is very varied. The band of land closest to the plateau edge is generally well drained and has good quality, unimproved pasture. Away from the edge of the plateau, the quality of land deteriorates. The grassland is poorer, there is more heather and moorland grasses, and in the depressions there is bog. The area of bogland increases towards the centre of the plateau. There are small lakes in the hollows and extensive areas of thick bog. The vegetation has had a strong influence on the historical land-use of the upland and has also affected the visibility of the archaeological remains. Earthworks are more difficult to find in areas of thicker heather and are entirely hidden beneath the blanket bog which has developed over them; field walls run into the areas of bog and disappear below the surface which has now developed.

The archaeology of this area remains little explored. Some mapping of the landscape was begun in the early 1980s in a joint project between Ulster Museum and Queen's University Belfast. Work was concentrated

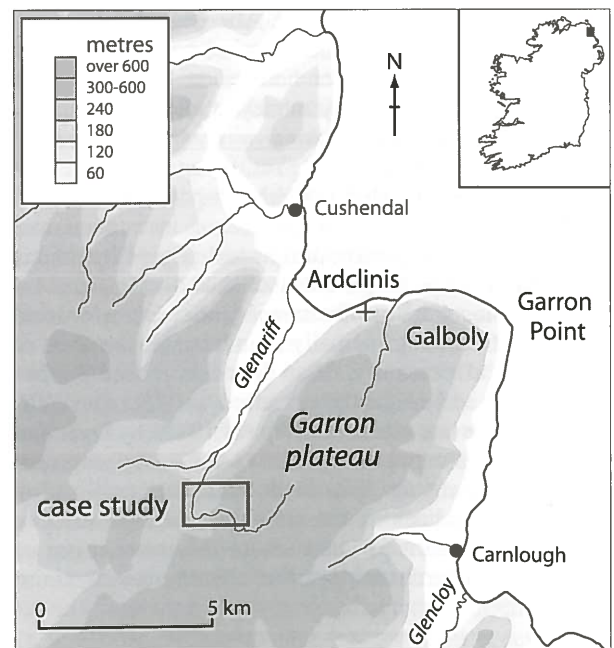


Figure 1 Location of the Garron plateau on the east coast of Northern Ireland

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Figure 2 The Garron plateau escarpment from near Ardclinis



Figure 3 The Glenariff valley looking towards the Garron plateau

particularly on the plateau above Glencloy (Woodman 1983). An undergraduate dissertation was based on a field survey of the plateau edge (Brennan 1982), and a doctoral thesis on the vegetation and the date of field walls was prepared in connection with the project (Francis 1987). One excavation was undertaken within the survey area, on a Neolithic flint-scatter at Nappan (Sheridan 1986), with other excavations nearby, at Bay Park Farm (Mallory 1991–92; Woodman and Johnson 1996), Gortin (Gardiner 2010a), Tievebulliagh (Mallory

1990) and Windy Ridge (Woodman *et al.* 1991–92). Aerial photographs were taken by Barrie Hartwell of Queen's University, and he plotted some of the earthworks from these. After this burst of activity, the study of the area lapsed until summer 2010. A new phase of work began, initially with the intention of extending the study of transhumance which had been undertaken in the Mourne mountains (Gardiner 2010b; 2011), but it was immediately clear that the remains on the Garron plateau were of a quite different character. The earthworks were

much more extensive, and a programme of systematic ground survey and recording was planned. This work has allowed the plotting of a multi-period landscape of great complexity. Aerial photographs have proved crucial in identifying sites, particularly in the pasture located towards the edge of the plateau where they are clearly visible. Beneath the heather they can be seen less clearly and everywhere ground recording has been necessary to interpret the character of the remains and their sequence. Pro-forma sheets have been filled out for each building and archaeological feature. The sites have been described, photographed, sketch plans drawn, and their positions noted using navigation-grade GPS. This will allow sites to be selected for a future phase of more detailed mapping and subsequent excavation.

The present paper pays special attention to the late medieval remains on the Garron plateau, but it is impossible to ignore those of other periods. Earlier remains have often influenced the presence of those of medieval date and later activity has had an impact on the subsequent survival of earthworks. The landscape needs to be treated as a whole and the remains of each period have to be carefully disentangled from those of other ages.

Pre-medieval remains

An immediately striking feature of the Garron plateau are the lines of field walls which run at right-angles to the edge of the escarpment (Fig. 4). The field walls change direction as the escarpment curves around from Garron Point and then beyond Ardclinis into Glenariff so that they are not parallel, but always run backwards from the cliff edge. The walls are formed of banks

built of stone and sod, and they divide the land into a series of long, narrow fields. The field walls were not all built at the same time and some seem to have been inserted later, but the detailed sequence has yet to be worked out. A few cross walls divide up these fields, and these are usually responsive to the topography, occurring on the top or bottom of hill slopes. The study by Francis (1987) showed that one of the parallel field walls had been constructed on peat dated to 1088–796 cal BC (at two sigma), suggesting that the whole field pattern might be attributed to the Late Bronze Age. Towards the centre of the plateau the field walls are overlain by blanket bog and can only be recognized where they were constructed on higher ground. One length of wall has been identified where it was built over a projecting 'island' in the bog, but it disappears on either side where it has been covered by peat which formed subsequently. It remains to be determined how many other field walls might be present, but which are partially or entirely buried.

This is amongst the larger areas of dated prehistoric fields recognized in Ireland. However, the fields did not exist in isolation, and a series of circular buildings and associated enclosures have also been identified. Round buildings had been noted throughout the course of the survey, but their interpretation was initially tempered by scepticism about whether prehistoric buildings might survive as earthworks. The date of these buildings still remains an open question, since round buildings continued to be constructed in Ireland until about AD 1000 (Lynn 1978, 37), but there seems no reason to assume that all of the earthworks are that late. Many of the round houses may indeed be contemporary with the Late Bronze Age fields. The circular buildings tend to occur in groups and

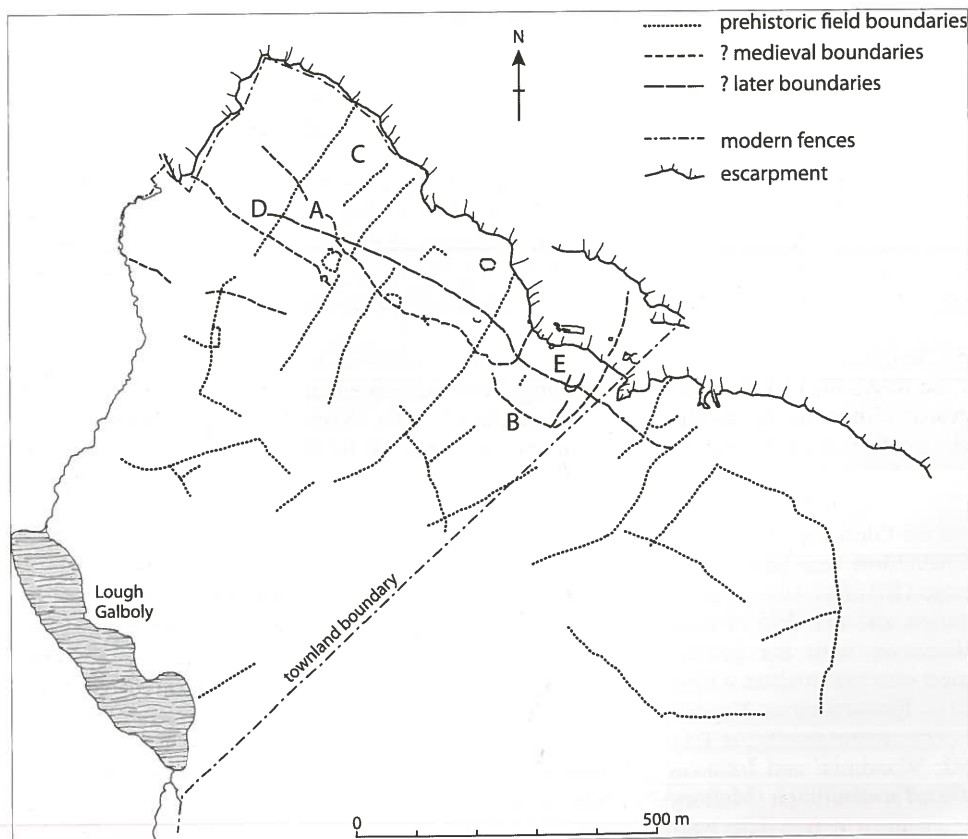


Figure 4 Field boundaries above Galboly. A, B: first-phase boundaries, possibly late medieval in date. C, E: areas with cultivation ridges. D: later field wall.

are often associated with short lengths of curving wall, sometimes forming small enclosures.

Areas of upland are known in a number of areas of Britain with evidence for the survival of earthworks from the prehistoric period, most famously on Dartmoor where the field boundaries called reaves were laid out in the second millennium BC. Bronze Ages hut circles also remain as upstanding earthworks (Fleming 2007). The existence of such remains in the Irish uplands would not, therefore, be particularly surprising.

The late medieval remains

The term 'medieval' requires some definition in an Irish context. It can be divided into two periods. The early Middle Ages, sometimes known as the early Christian period, runs from around AD 500 until the middle of the twelfth century. The late medieval period extends from the mid-twelfth century to at least the time of the Nine Years War (1594–1603), which was followed by the Plantations. One of the problems in medieval Irish archaeology has been to establish firm chronologies, since pottery is relatively rare and ceramic types continued in production for long periods with little change. The landscape survey described here relies upon the relative dating of earthworks and so no precision is possible.

Pollen analysis on the plateau has established that there was a major period of woodland clearance in the late Iron Age or early Middle Ages which lasted for little over a century. Subsequently, the area of birch increased and scrubby woodland re-established itself. By the late Middle Ages the tree pollen declined, heathland formed on the plateau and blanket bog developed more widely (Francis 1987, 105). As a result, settlements of the Late Middle Ages are largely found on the better drained soils of the escarpment edge where the bog did not get established.

Some of the areas of good pasture near the escarpment edge are enclosed by walls which are probably late medieval in date. They are certainly later than the prehistoric field boundaries which they overlie. The most complex series of field walls are found above Galboly where the medieval or later boundaries can be divided into two main phases based on their stratigraphy. The earlier phase appears to have a rather irregular course, but is one which has a clear logic on the ground and is strongly related to the topography (Fig. 4). The wall initially enclosed the area of the best soils (A), but was subsequently extended eastwards almost as far as the townland boundary and to the south-west on to poorer, more boggy soils (B). An area of cultivation ridges lies towards the north-west of the area first enclosed (C).

The second phase (D) cuts across and indeed uses stones robbed from the first phase wall. It was planned on a larger scale from the outset and, like the early wall, stopped before the townland boundary which was marked by a stream and now by a fence and wall. However, it was later extended further eastwards. The positions of gates are marked by short 'hornworks', projecting lengths of wall which would have allowed livestock to be driven along the wall and then funnelled through it to the land beyond. The wall encloses an area of cultivation ridges which run up to it (E). The wall

simply ends at the west end and two buildings were constructed at its terminal. The date of this second-phase wall is uncertain, though it was clearly out of use by the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century when it was crossed and in places partially removed by a number of deeply incised trackways. The nature of these trackways is discussed further below.

Similar field walls are found in a number of other locations along the edge of the escarpment, though nowhere else are they as extensive as at Galboly. In some cases they were evidently constructed to enclose areas of cultivation, but elsewhere the intention seems to have been to separate livestock grazing in the rough pasture from the better pasture on the plateau edge. The management of livestock was an important aspect of the earthworks on the Garron plateau. A series of roughly circular enclosures can be found in many places on the Antrim uplands (for example, D on Fig. 8), not only on the Garron plateau. These were generally in the order of 20 metres in diameter and, rather curiously, they all lack obvious entrances. This absence was not understood until an eighteenth- or nineteenth-century example with similar dimensions and standing walls was studied. It was apparent that the entrance was made by removing part of the dry-stone wall and replacing it once the livestock were inside. That obviated the use of a wooden gate, wood being particularly scarce in the uplands. The enclosures are generally dated to the late medieval period or possibly to the seventeenth century on their basis of their frequent association with buildings attributed to that period. An example overlies a prehistoric field boundary. The locations of these enclosures were carefully chosen to be on drier ground and in more protected situations. One enclosure is notably larger than the others and measures 70 metres in diameter. Its site is still used for herding and separating sheep which graze in the uplands, though this is now done with the smaller, dry-stone and mortared structures built in the interior of the former enclosure. The edge of the enclosure was later incorporated into the boundary of a field (Fig. 5).

The remains of a large number of rectangular or oval-shaped buildings can be found around the edge of the plateau. The range of shapes and methods of construction makes it a difficult task to sort these into different types. However, a simple distinction may be made between the oval or 'rounded rectangular' buildings and those with right-angle corners. The former seem to be the type of buildings recorded on Elizabethan and Jacobean maps (Ó Danachair 1969). Such buildings, depicted with great care on the maps by Robert Bartlett, appear to be constructed of wicker, had a central doorway along the long axis and are clearly shown with rounded corners. There was a long tradition of the use of wicker in Ireland, whether in early medieval round houses, such as those recently published from the nearby Deer Park Farms (Lynn and McDowell 2011), or for providing the centring for later medieval masonry vaults and arches (Waterman 1958, 77). Where wickerwork was used as a structural element, the strongest forms were rounded in plan since this avoided the concentration of stress at any corners. There are a few examples of excavated buildings of this form, but details of their construction are lacking (Gardiner 2010a; Horning 2001, 385–95;



Figure 5 The seventy-metre diameter enclosure above Cushenilt

Williams 1988, 94–99). The date range of these oval-shaped or ‘rounded rectangular’ buildings is uncertain. O’Conor (2002, 203–04) suggests that they may have been used from at least the thirteenth or fourteenth century until the seventeenth century, but an earlier start date seems more likely. The sites of such buildings are marked by very low sod walls, sometimes revetted in stone (Fig. 6). The purpose of the sod walls may have been to ensure that water did not enter under the wicker. In three places buildings of this type have been found constructed over cultivation ridges indicating that they are later.

The second type of building was constructed with mass walls of either stone or sod and were rectangular in shape.

These may overlap in date with the oval buildings, but as a type should generally be placed later. The shortage of timber in Ireland from around 1700 onwards encouraged the use of new forms of construction which reduced the need for wood (Gailey 1984, 44–46). In a building with mass walls, timber was only required for the rafter couples, and not for the structural timbers. Both sod- and stone-walled structures have been identified. They seem to have been constructed using these materials to the height of the eaves. There is a further category of rectangular building which used sod or sod and stone, but they seem to lack sufficient building material to have formed the wall in this way to eaves height. We must presume that they were constructed with timber posts or



Figure 6 Oval-shaped building edged with stone above Cushenilt

crucks with low walls, though the details of this remain obscure. A fourth category of building are the very small oval buildings which are of similar dimensions and plan to the transhumance (booley) huts recorded in the Mourne mountains (Gardiner 2010b; 2011). These have been found in only a single area, and even there their identification is questionable. This suggests that the seasonal movement of livestock on to the plateau was not a common practice. A fifth and final category of structure are the circular shelters which measure 1.5 meters or less in diameter and were situated to overlook areas of pasture. These are too small even for seasonal occupation, but seem to have been built to provide shelter from wind and rain during the day for the herders who were watching grazing livestock (Fig. 7).

Groups of buildings are particularly found close to areas of cultivation ridges. Small-scale arable farming was evidently conducted from groups of houses, known as clachans. Arable cultivation, presumably of oats, provided a supplement to the predominantly pastoral economy. The clearest example of this lies in Fallowee townland where there are a group of buildings, separated by a bank from a set of cultivation ridges, which are themselves enclosed within banked fields. A later enclosure overlies some of the cultivation ridges. The date of this farm is uncertain, though there are no oval-shaped buildings, so it might be seventeenth or even eighteenth century in date.

Post-medieval usage

Efforts to exploit and improve the uplands in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries have left comparatively little trace in this area. Two phases of improvement can, however, be identified. In the first access to the uplands was improved by the construction of engineered routeways up on to the plateau. Most of

these are shown on the first-edition six-inch Ordnance Survey maps made in the 1830s, suggesting that they were in use at that time. Some of those routeways cut across earlier ones climbing up to the upland. The clearly planned and carefully executed nature of the mapped trackways is apparent. They were cut into the sides of the slope and the gradients at the bottom of the hill were reduced by the construction of embankments. The trackways are not wide, and certainly insufficient for a cart, and they are in any case too steep for a wheeled vehicle. They were almost certainly for slide cars, a type of sledge pulled by a pony which was particularly well adapted for going over bog and for steep slopes. Slide cars are recorded in this area in the 1830s in the Ordnance Survey Memoirs (Day and McWilliams 1992, 2) and remained in use into the twentieth century (Evans 1951). Their purpose on the upland was almost certainly to bring down turf (peat) for use as fuel by the farms in the lowland. There are extensive turf-cuttings on the bogs on the plateau and the tracks from the head of the routeways can be seen heading towards these. Walls are associated with some of these routeways. These would have allowed livestock to be driven towards the tracks and then channelled down the steep mountain paths. Whether there were any settlements on the plateau in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries is unclear. Certainly, there is little evidence of land improvement until the second half of the nineteenth century.

That second phase of improvement occurred between the second- and third- editions of the six-inch map – 1857/8 and 1906 – when new farms were built on the plateau. These were established some distance from the edge of the plateau on very poor soils, suggesting that grazing continued on the periphery of the plateau. They are associated with well-marked potato beds and represent a brief period when farmers struggled to scrape a living from the poor soils of the uplands.



Figure 7 Herder's shelter at the head of Glenariff. Scale length 0.4m.

Much effort was spent to construct the distinctive stone-built houses, which now lie in ruins. The farmsteads were all abandoned after a brief period and for much of the twentieth century this area of the plateau was uninhabited.

Case Study

A case study provides an example of the complexity of the landscape of the Garron plateau. There is reasonable access to the plateau from the head of the Glenariff valley and consequently there is a concentration of field walls, enclosures and buildings (Fig. 8). A well-marked wall (Wall H) of vertically set stones runs alongside the Inver River. The wall is intermittent and was built wherever livestock might have managed to cross the river. It extends for over 1 km up the river. The wall has been built over a former, and now dry, course of the river and this, together with the fact that many of the stones still remain upright, suggests that it is not more than a few centuries old. It is perhaps significant that the upper part of the river served as a boundary between two townlands, and it is possible that the whole length may once have been a territorial division. A further wall (A) follows the unnamed watercourse, called here Cloghcor stream, and is similar in character to Wall H.

These two walls seem to define an area of pasture. It is notable that a number of small circular shelters, barely one metre in diameter, overlooked the pasture between these walls (Fig. 7). The shelters were apparently built to provide protection for the herders who were overseeing the livestock. These are too small to have been slept in and must have been for day-time use only.

Walls A and H can be distinguished from three walls (E, F, G) which run at right angles to the river and are now largely lost beneath the blanket bog. Wall A seems to cut across one of these walls (G). The narrow gateways through the walls E and F are marked by orthostats. Some of these walls are likely to be prehistoric, and the number recorded is probably a fraction of the total because they can only be identified where they emerge from the bog.

There are two enclosures at the head of the valley. The larger (D) lies on a slope between Collin Burn and Cloghcor stream looking down the valley. It measures 140m in width by about half that from north to south and has walls over one metre broad. It seems to have been extended on the western side. There are two round houses within the extension to the enclosure towards the top of the slope. Three oval or rectangular buildings were also constructed within the enclosure. A second enclosure (B) can be dated with greater certainty. It was only 10 meters in diameter with a spur wall to assist in

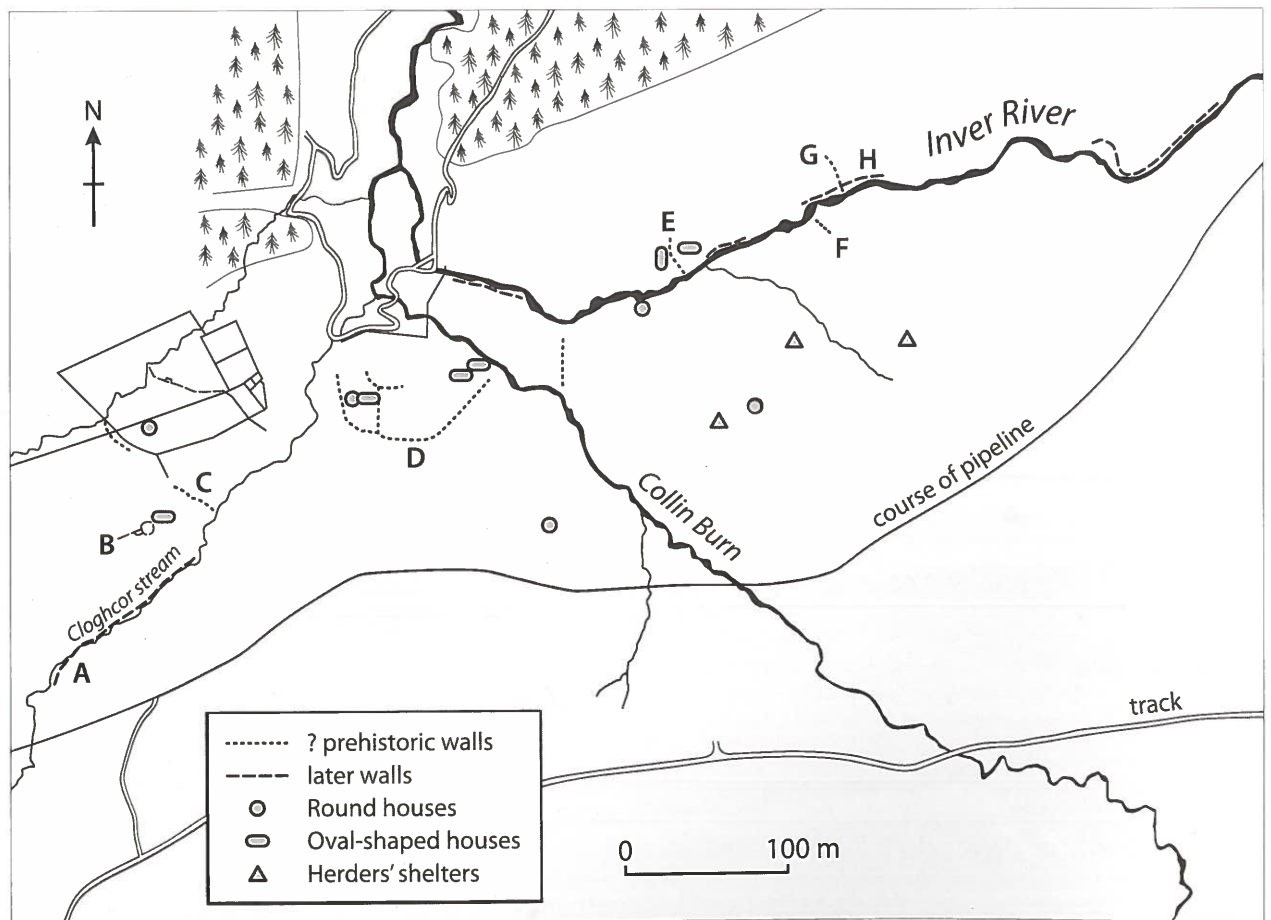


Figure 8 Archaeological features above the head of Glenariff in the area of the case study. A, H: walls running alongside the Inver River and Cloghcor stream. B: animal enclosure with associated house. C: ?prehistoric wall surviving only partially. D: enclosure with associated buildings. E, F, G: probable prehistoric walls largely buried beneath the blanket bog.

herding the livestock inside. It has a stone building to the north-east, suggesting that it belongs to the sixteenth to eighteenth century.

Other buildings have been recorded near the head of Glenariff. Round houses are found on a number of slopes, and a group of oval-shaped buildings occur in an area of pasture above Inver River.

Discussion

There are formidable problems in teasing out the different periods of activity from a landscape containing features extending over a period of perhaps three millennia. On the Garron plateau there is exceptional survival of field walls, traces of cultivation and well in excess of eighty buildings so far identified of different periods. The task of simply recording the details of a landscape stretching over many square kilometres is a substantial one. The abundance of remains suggests that this was never 'marginal' land, if we mean by that term land which was barely used and of little economic value. The area has been exploited in different ways over this long period. It was generally used as pasture, but on occasions some areas were ploughed up for arable. The territorial relationships between the settlements below the plateau and those upon it no doubt varied over time, but the very small number of booley (transhumance) huts – if indeed that is what they are – indicates that the upland was not treated as a resource to be exploited in the summer months alone.

Even at this preliminary stage of work we can begin to draw some general conclusions about the character of late medieval settlement in the area. It is clear that the buildings tend to be both isolated and more rarely clustered in small groups, but never in larger numbers. Although there has been some discussion about the date at which the clachans, or small groups of houses appear, there is no reason on the evidence here to argue that clusters of buildings were not found in the later Middle Ages. The buildings recorded on the plateau were small in size and there is no obvious difference marking out the houses of the more wealthy from those of the poorer people. If there is a difference in size of building, it appears to be related to function rather than status. Some groups of buildings tend to be associated with areas of cultivation ridges, and we may conclude that they were the homes of the farmers who were tilling the land.

The management of livestock was a continuing preoccupation for those in the uplands and a considerable number of the features attributed to the late medieval period are connected with grazing. Few enclosed fields were created during the medieval period. Most areas of arable were not entirely surrounded by walls and some had no walls or other markers around the fields at all. We must assume that the livestock were watched over to keep them from straying into the crops, something suggested by the presence of small shelters apparently built for herders. Some walls were built: they are found, for example in the area of the case study, perhaps to stop livestock from wandering too freely. But there is another possibility here, which is that they served as a barrier towards which the livestock could be driven in order to gather them together. Otherwise, the landscape seems to have been remarkably open. The long medieval walls

constructed above Galboly appear to divide an area of better pasture from the rough pasture beyond, and presumably allowed the controlled grazing of livestock. Overall, the purpose of late medieval field walls seems to have been not to act as property boundaries, but to control the movement of animals.

The landscape of medieval Ireland has proved remarkably difficult to identify, except in those areas near the centre of Anglo-Norman manors which seem to have some resemblances to English settlements (see for example, Murphy and Potterton 2010). Elsewhere, many elements of the landscape seem to have less permanently marked. The pattern of roads and trackways in rural Ireland are often hard to locate and they have to be painstakingly reconstructed (Doran 2004). River crossings may be identifiable from stone or timber bridges and fords, but otherwise the line of roads are very difficult to detect. Open landscapes and temporary field boundaries seem to have been a feature of late medieval Ireland. Fields were marked by stake fences which lasted for a year or two, if they were marked at all (Nicholls 2003, 132). This aspect of the landscape particularly struck sixteenth- and seventeenth-century travellers (Aalen 1965, 32). More permanent small enclosures, known as 'parks', were established, particularly from the fifteenth century onwards (Otway-Ruthven 1951, 8).

The study of the landscape of this area is still at a preliminary stage. It is not simply that the earthworks need to be identified and recorded, but rather that we have no context in which to begin to interpret what has been found. The landscape of the Garron plateau may represent not an area of the upland margin, but a more typical system of extensive land-use found outside the Anglo-Norman heartland. The ultimate importance of the Garron plateau may be that it alerts us to the sort of landscape which we should be seeking elsewhere in Ireland.

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