



NUI MAYNOOTH
Ollscoil na hÉireann Ma Nuad

**THE SOCIAL AND IDEOLOGICAL
ROLE OF CRANNOGS
IN EARLY MEDIEVAL IRELAND**

by

AIDAN O'SULLIVAN

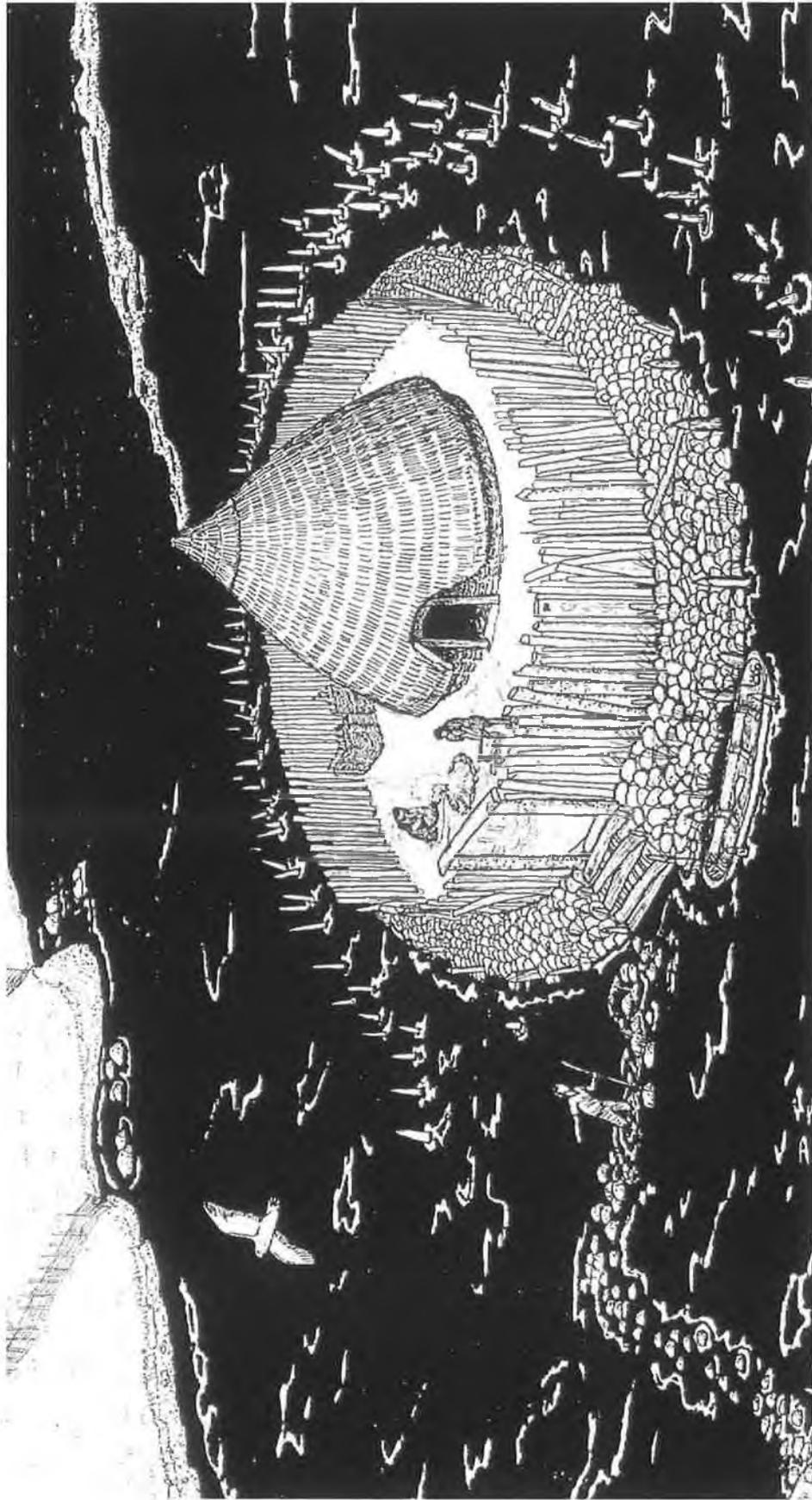
**THESIS FOR THE DEGREE OF PH.D.
DEPARTMENT OF MODERN HISTORY
NATIONAL UNIVERSITY OF IRELAND
MAYNOOTH**

**HEAD OF DEPARTMENT: Professor R.V. Comerford
Supervisor of Research: Mr. John Bradley**

**Volume One
of Two**

TEXT

March 2004



Frontispiece: Reconstruction drawing of an early medieval crannog based on archaeological evidence from Westmeath.

Contents

Frontispiece.....	ii
Table of contents.....	iii
List of Tables.....	vii
List of Figures	viii
List of Appendices	xv
Acknowledgements.....	xvi
Chapter 1. Introduction.....	1
Introduction.....	1
The archaeology and history of crannogs in early medieval Ireland.....	1
Aims and objectives of this thesis.....	8
Regional and local perspectives.....	10
Exploring island life in the early Middle Ages.....	13
Outline of thesis chapters.....	13
Chapter 2. Islands and the scholarly imagination: a historiography of crannog studies.....	19
Introduction.....	19
From peasant folklore to antiquarian respectability, 1750-1857.....	21
A forgotten tradition – before ‘crannogs’, 1750-1810.....	21
The first antiquarian recognition of islands and houses in lakes, 1810-1839.....	24
Collecting objects from the ‘bone-heap’ of Lagore, 1839-48.....	27
The Commission for Arterial Drainage and Inland Navigation and the ‘Strokestown crannogs’, Co. Roscommon, 1843-1852.....	30
William Wilde’s ‘Catalogue of Antiquities’, 1857.....	33
Early antiquarian surveys, excavations, and syntheses, 1860-1932.....	36
George Morant, George Kinahan and William Wakeman and other antiquarians, 1860-1886.....	36
Discoveries at Lisnacrogher and Lough Mourne, Co. Antrim.....	41
Wood-Martin’s <i>The lake dwellings of Ireland</i> , 1886.....	42
George Buick, Rev. D’Arcy, George Coffey and the new century, 1890-1920.....	45
The impact of the Harvard Archaeological Mission, 1932-1970.....	48
The Harvard Archaeological Mission in the 1930s and 1940s.....	48
Oliver Davies and crannog excavations in Northern Ireland, 1940-1950.....	53
The County Down Archaeological Survey and crannog studies in Northern Ireland, 1950-1966.....	54
Discoveries at Lough Gara in the 1950s.....	56
Archaeological survey, excavation and changing ideas, 1970-2002.....	60
The Fermanagh crannog survey and dendrochronological studies in the 1970s.....	60
Re-thinking old sites and the Wood-Martin crannog conference, 1986.....	61
Treasure hunters and the state, 1980-1987.....	63

The Crannog Archaeological Project 1983-1993.....	65
The Archaeological Survey of Ireland 1980-2002.....	69
The Moynagh Lough excavations, 1980-2002.....	70
The Discovery Programme and 'The lake settlement project, 1997-.....	73
The Lough Gara 'Crannog Research Programme'.....	75
Conclusions.....	79

Chapter 3. Interpreting islands:

approaches to the archaeology and history of early medieval crannogs.....	80
Introduction.....	80
Multidisciplinary approaches: objects, texts and meanings.....	80
Places and objects: archaeological evidence.....	80
Plants, animals and lifeways: palaeoenvironmental reconstruction.....	81
Texts and contexts: early Irish historical evidence.....	82
Multidisciplinary approaches: problems and potential.....	84
Theoretical and methodological approaches to settlement and landscape.....	87
Introduction: approaches to settlement and landscape in archaeological thought... ..	87
Processual approaches to settlement and landscape.....	88
Postprocessual approaches to settlement and landscape.....	89
Reconstructing settlement and landscape in early medieval Ireland.....	90
Introduction.....	90
Early medieval settlement and landscape, sixth to eighth century AD.....	91
Early medieval settlement and landscape, ninth to eleventh century AD.....	96
Interpretative approaches to early medieval crannogs in Ireland.....	98
Interpreting crannogs in the early medieval landscape.....	98
Interpreting crannogs as early medieval island dwellings.....	100
Place, memory and belonging.....	102
People, islands and social identity.....	103
Conclusions.....	104

Chapter 4. Islands and social identity in the early medieval imagination..... 105

Introduction.....	105
Islands and the early medieval imagination.....	108
Introduction.....	108
Islands as places apart from, and at the centre of, the world.....	112
Islands, negotiating boundaries, edges and liminalities.....	125
Islands, journeys, movement and arrival.....	127
Islands and social identity in the early Middle Ages.....	129
Introduction.....	129
Interpreting early medieval social identities.....	130
Islands, ethnicity and identity in early medieval Ireland.....	132
Islands, kinship, community and the <i>túath</i> in early medieval Ireland.....	137
Islands, social hierarchy and status in early medieval Ireland.....	142
Islands, gender, sexuality and age in early medieval Ireland.....	158
Conclusions.....	169

Chapter 5: Islands in watery worlds: a landscape perspective on early medieval crannogs	170
Introduction.....	170
Landscape, settlement and society in early medieval Westmeath.....	170
Introduction.....	170
Physical landscape and environment in Westmeath.....	172
Physical landscape and environment on Lough Derravarragh.....	185
Early medieval politics and people in Westmeath.....	196
Early medieval settlement and landscape in Westmeath.....	207
Regional and local landscape perspectives on crannogs in early medieval Westmeath.....	215
Introduction.....	215
Siting in relation to topography, geology and soils.....	216
Siting in relation to drainage, lakes and rivers.....	217
Siting in relation to other archaeological sites.....	218
Siting in relation to early medieval settlement landscapes.....	220
Siting in relation to early medieval political boundaries.....	221
Islands, landscapes and society in early medieval Westmeath.....	224
Introduction.....	224
Islands, power and performance in the social and ideological landscape.....	224
Islands, lordship, community and territorial defence.....	235
Islands, social marginality and 'living at the edge'.....	241
Islands, agriculture and working the land in early medieval Westmeath.....	252
Introduction.....	252
The role of crannogs in early medieval agriculture and economy.....	253
Crannogs, agriculture and the land in early medieval Westmeath.....	256
Living by lakeshores and the routines of agricultural labour.....	259
Islands, landscape and movement in early medieval Westmeath.....	261
Introduction.....	261
Crannogs and movement along watery routeways.....	262
Crannogs and movement along esker roads and pathways.....	264
Movement through early medieval lakeshore topographies of power.....	267
Conclusions.....	269
Chapter 6. Islands and architectures: the building, occupation and perception of early medieval crannogs	271
Introduction.....	271
Island histories: crannogs, time and social memory.....	272
Introduction.....	272
Crannogs and chronology in Westmeath.....	273
Crannogs and chronology in Ireland.....	280
'Remembering': crannogs as symbols of the past in the early Middle Ages.....	291
'Lifecycles': site maintenance practices, renewal and alteration.....	297
'Forgetting': site destruction, abandonment and desertion.....	301
Islands apart: the architecture and insularity of crannogs.....	307
Introduction.....	307
The building of a crannog as an event in the community.....	307

Building islands on water: the morphology of cairns, mounds and platforms.....	314
Building crannogs in Westmeath: cairns, mounds and platforms.....	316
Palisades, revetments kerbs and walls in Westmeath: enclosing and excluding....	335
Causeways and pathways on Westmeath: journeying and arriving.....	344
Landing stages, harbours and jetties in Westmeath.....	348
Dugout boats.....	350
Conclusions.....	353

Chapter 7: Island life:

interpreting the social organisation of space on early medieval crannogs.....	354
Introduction.....	354
Reconstructing the social organisation of space within early medieval crannogs.....	355
Entering the island: entrances and pathways.....	356
Introduction.....	356
Entrances, gates and pathways.....	357
Living on an island: observing work and daily life on early medieval crannogs.....	360
Introduction.....	360
Understanding social hierarchy and status by observing labour on crannogs.....	361
Understanding gender by observing labour on crannogs.....	362
Wood working.....	362
Bone, antler and leatherworking.....	363
Iron working and non-ferrous metalworking.....	363
Early medieval metal working and Moynagh Lough crannog.....	364
Early medieval iron working islands: Bofeenaun and Sroove crannogs.....	368
Feasting space: food, dirt and the social role of middens on early medieval crannogs.....	372
Introduction.....	372
Interpreting patterns of rubbish and discard on crannogs.....	375
Human bones in middens.....	377
Middens outside houses.....	380
Middens at the palisades.....	380
Cesspits.....	384
Houses and dwellings on early medieval crannogs: theatres for social encounters.....	385
Introduction.....	385
Lifecycles of early medieval houses.....	387
Interpreting houses on early medieval crannogs.....	388
House form, size and location.....	389
Doorways and entrances.....	395
Floor surfaces: palimpsests of human history.....	396
Hearths and fireplaces: symbols of the household.....	406
Conclusions.....	407

Chapter 8. Conclusions.....	408
------------------------------------	------------

List of tables

Table 6.1: Chronology of artefacts recovered from crannogs in Westmeath.....	274
Table 6.2: Dendrochronological and radiocarbon dates from Irish crannogs.....	281

List of Figures

Fig. 1.1 Map showing distribution of crannogs in Ireland, based on records of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland and the Environment and Heritage Service, Northern Ireland. (Source: Aidan O'Sullivan, *Crannogs: Lake dwellings of early Ireland*).

Fig. 1.2. Reconstruction drawing of a hypothetical early medieval crannog, based on evidence from sites in the north midlands. The crannog is a cairn of stone laid over a wooden foundation, with sand and clay spread across its upper surface. It is accessed by a stone causeway which leads through the shallow water to the entrance and is enclosed within an 'inner' roundwood palisade, while the remnants of an ancient, rotting palisade revets the cairn edge at the water level. Out in the water, there is another 'outer' palisade, defining a watery space around the island. Internally, the crannog has a roundhouse, an outside hearth and working spaces. It will be proposed in this thesis that all this architecture can be interpreted in social and ideological terms (drawing: Aidan O'Sullivan).

Fig. 2.1 View across northwest shore of Donore townland, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. A local folktale recorded by William Wilde in 1860 described how a crannog on this shore known as 'The Castle' (probably Castlewatty) was the venue for a fantastic encounter between two fishermen and a woman of the underworld. By the 1930s, Lough Derravarragh's crannogs had been forgotten locally and there is little mention of them in the Folklore Commissions School's Manuscripts (CUCAP AHH 43).

Fig. 2.2 One of the earliest depictions of an Irish crannog, in a drawing of an 'artificial island and old fort' at Ballymacpeake, Co. Londonderry in 1836. (Source: Royal Irish Academy Ordnance Survey Memoirs, Parish of Maghera; C.S. Briggs, 'A historiography of the Irish crannog', p. 350).

Fig. 2.3 Engineer's cross-section drawing of an early medieval crannog at Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon, illustrating the quality of these early records. (Source: Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland*).

Fig. 2.4 Kinahan's remarkable reconstruction drawing of an Irish crannog, based on his surveys of sites on Lough Naneevin, Co. Galway and perhaps inspired by ethnography. He imagined a circular house with a central courtyard, probably based on his observation of multiple palisades on sites (source: Kinahan. 'Notes on a crannoge in Lough Naneevin', p. 1).

Fig. 2.5 Wakeman's site plan and landscape perspective of a crannog on Lough Eyes, Co. Fermanagh in 1870 and drawing of a late medieval everted rim-ware pot from the same lake, completed as part of his indefatigable surveys in the northwest. Wakeman's drawings served to embed images of Irish crannogs in the antiquarian sensibility (source: Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland*)

Fig. 2.6 William Wakeman's iconic and enduring reconstruction drawing of an Irish crannog, reproduced as the frontispiece of Wood-Martin's *The lake dwellings of Ireland*, 'ideally restored from inspection of numerous sites'. (Source: Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland*).

Fig. 2.7 The Harvard Archaeological Expedition archaeologists, Hallam L. Movius and Hugh O'Neill Hencken, with Dr. Adolf Mahr, director of the National Museum of Ireland, at their first summer's excavations at the early medieval crannog of Ballinderry No. 1, Co. Westmeath. The Harvard Mission aimed to provide powerful new narratives about the 'origins of the Irish.' (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry no. 1'.).

Fig. 2.8a Early medieval crannog at Tonymore crannog, Lough Kinale, Co. Longford. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

Fig. 2.8b Reconstructed eighth-century bookshrine found by treasure hunters beside Tonymore crannog, Lough Kinale, Co. Longford in 1980s. In these years the century-old tradition of collecting antiquities from crannogs came up against the growing legislative power of state archaeologists. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

Fig. 2.9 Aerial photograph of early medieval Cróinis crannog and Dún na Sciath ringfort, on the southwest shore of Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. This lake was the main location of the Crannog Archaeological Survey's still largely unpublished underwater surveys, between 1983 and 1993 (CUCAP AVH 20).

Fig. 3.1 An early medieval multivallate ringfort and an early medieval crannog at Lisleitrim, Co. Armagh. It is likely that this is a royal settlement complex, with prominent siting and impressive architecture being used to project a normative image of power in the landscape (Source: Aidan O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement in Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), p. 137, pl. 44).

Fig. 3.2 Aerial photograph of three early medieval ringforts in Loughanstown townland in the barony of Corkaree, Co. Westmeath, between Lough Derravarragh and Lough Owel. These ringforts with their enclosed spaces, banks and ditches, prominent siting and proximity to each other illustrate the locally dense early medieval settlement on the good agricultural soils of Westmeath (CUCAP AVO 61, after Stout 1997, plate 8).

Fig. 3.3 Stout's hypothetical model of the social organisation of the early medieval settlement landscape (i.e. sixth-ninth century AD) in the southwest midlands. The lord's (*aire forgill*) multivallate ringfort is located in a commanding site, near an important routeway and is surrounded by the simple, univallate forts of his *ócaire* tenants. The ringfort of the *aire deso* lord is on level terrain near the *tuath* boundary, indicating his role in territorial defence. The ringforts of the *bóaire* farmers are further away, indicating that these independent farmers owned their own land. A significant church site is located on the routeway and some land is either farmed in common or is in woodland. (Source: Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, p. 126).

Fig. 3.4 A hypothetical model of social and settlement continuity and change towards the end of the early Middle Ages. This suggests that in the ninth and tenth century, there was a shift away from a 'dispersed' settlement pattern as ringforts were being abandoned, with a emergence of 'nucleated' settlements in the eleventh and twelfth century, focused on lordly sites (i.e. raised raths) and significant church settlements. Although archaeologists and historians have traced some evidence for this change, it remains largely unsubstantiated. (Source: Tadhg O'Keefe, *Medieval Ireland: an archaeology* (Stroud, 2000), p. 25, Fig. 7).

Fig. 4.1 Early medieval island monastery of Inishmurray, Co. Sligo. While the monastery had churches, beehive cells, and *leachta*, it was also a significant destination for medieval pilgrims, who visited the island's hostels, public churches and saint's tomb. (Source: Peter Somerville Large, *Ireland's Islands: Landscape, life and legends* (Dublin, 2000), p. 47).

Fig. 4.2 Early medieval island hermitage on Church Island, Ballycarbery West, off Valentia Island, Co. Kerry, with its beehive hut, oratory and burials inside a stone enclosure. Some of these small island hermitages were hardly larger than a midlands crannog (Source: A. O'Sullivan and J. Sheehan *The Iveragh Peninsula: An archaeological survey of south Kerry* (Cork, 1996), p. 254, 257, Pl. XVIII).

Fig. 4.3 Early medieval crannog on Lough Hackett, Co. Galway, probably a royal site. This island is the venue for various supernatural encounters in the tenth-century *life* of Mochua of Balla and the *Annals of the Four Masters* states that it was damaged by a storm in AD 990. (Source: O. Alcock, K. de hÓra and P. Gosling, *Archaeological inventory of County Galway. Vol. II: North Galway* (Dublin, 1999), Pl. IIIa, p. 119).

Fig. 4.4. The early medieval island of the dead, *Tech Donn*, known today as Bull Rock, the furthest island off Dursey Island, Beara Peninsula, Co. Cork. In early Irish literature dating from the ninth to the twelfth century, this island was viewed as the place 'where the dead assemble', *co tech nDuind frisndálait mairb*. (Source: Peter Somerville Large, *Ireland's Islands: Landscape, life and legends* (Dublin, 2000), p. 105).

Fig. 4.5 Plan of the early medieval crannog of Ballinderry No. 1, Co. Westmeath. The site was occupied from the late-tenth century to the late-eleventh century AD, and the distinctive Hiberno-Norse character of the crannog's houses and material culture suggests significant Scandinavian influences, if not even a presence, in the north Irish midlands at the end of the early Middle Ages. (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', Pl. XIII).

Fig. 4.6 Early Irish historical sources indicate that both early medieval crannogs and islands were occasionally used as prisons or as places to hold slaves (e.g. Dalkey Island, Co. Dublin). These possible slave chains or hostage collars were found with human remains beside the early medieval crannog of Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

Fig. 4.7 Early medieval monastic island of Scatterry Island, situated at the mouth of the Shannon estuary. In the tenth-century life of Senán, the island's sanctity was threatened by the arrival of a female saint, who only by a miracle gains the privilege of burial on the island. (Source: A. O'Sullivan, *Foragers, farmers and fishers in a coastal landscape*, (Dublin, 2001), p. 6, Pl. 3).

Fig. 5.1 Westmeath is a lowlying county in the north Irish midlands. This map illustrates its principal towns, routeways, lakes, rivers and general topography. (Source *The Encyclopedia of Ireland*, p.1131).

Fig. 5.2 Westmeath's lakelands, with distribution map of county's crannogs.

Fig. 5.3. Westmeath, map illustrating quaternary geology, drumlins, eskers and glacial drifts (Source: T.F. Finch Soils of Co. Westmeath (Dublin, 1977), Fig.4).

Fig. 5.4. Percentage summary arboreal and herbaceous pollen taxa from Cornaher Lough, south of Newtownlow crannog, Co. Westmeath (Source: Heery, 'The vegetation history of the Irish midlands', Fig. 2.8b, Fig. 2.8c).

Fig. 5.5. Aerial photograph of Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. In the foreground, the hills of Knockbrody, Knockcross and Knockeyon rise steeply from the narrow, deep, southeast end of the lake. In the middle distance, there are gentle slopes, while in the distance, the broad, shallow northwest end of the lake is fringed by raised bogs and fens (Photo: Aerofilms Ltd)

Fig. 5.6 Distribution map of early medieval monuments (ringforts, crannogs, churches and holy wells) around Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. The lough's crannogs are typically found at the shallow, northwest end, adjacent to good agricultural land, avoiding raised bogs and fens along the River Inny and the steep slopes of Knockeyon, Knockbrody and Knockcross, at the opposite, deep end of the lake.

Fig. 5.7 Early medieval dynasties and population groups in Westmeath, c. AD 800. Between the seventh and the eleventh century, this region was situated within the early medieval over-kingdom of Mide, which was largely controlled by the southern Uí Néill dynasty of the Clann Cholmáin.

Fig. 5.8 Early medieval settlement and landscape in Westmeath. Map illustrating the density and distribution of ringforts, crannogs, souterrains, churches, holy wells, bullaun stones and crosses. (Source Westmeath RMP, *Dúchas – the Heritage Service* and this author's surveys).

Fig. 5.9 Early medieval churches in Westmeath. Most of the county's parishes have one early church site suggesting that parish boundaries have their origins in the early Middle Ages. (Source: F.H.A. Allen *et al* eds. *The Atlas of the Irish rural landscape* (Cork, 1997), p. 52)

Fig. 5.10 Distribution of Westmeath's crannogs in relation to modern barony boundaries, indicating that as much as 79 per cent of the county's crannogs are on or close to *potential* early medieval *túath* boundaries.

Fig. 5.11 Map of early medieval settlement landscape at Dún na Sciath ringfort and Cróinis crannog, on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. These were the royal residences of the Clann Cholmáin kings of Mide between the eighth and the eleventh centuries AD.

Fig. 5.12 Map of early medieval ringforts and crannogs at Coolure Demesne, Lough Derravarragh. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that this was a royal or lordly settlement complex of the early medieval population group, the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair. The probable high-status crannog is situated in a small bay, overlooked by several other sites around the lakeshore and could have served as an island 'stage' to symbolise the king's central role in the community.

Fig. 5.13 Map illustrating landscapes of a possible early medieval lordly crannog at Dryderstown, Lough Annala, Co. Westmeath, 3km southwest of the early medieval royal site of the Uí Fhindalláin at Telach Cail (Delvin).

Fig. 5.14 Aerial photograph of early medieval crannog (ninth-century date from palisade) of Goose Island in its local landscape at Rochfort Demesne, on the east shore of Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath in 1968. The crannog is surrounded by several small low-cairn and platform crannogs all along this shoreline (Rochfort Demesne 1-9). These were probably the lake dwellings of ordinary or poor' people living and working on their lord's estates (CUCAP AVH 13).

Fig. 5.15 Map of small, low-cairn crannogs at Kiltoom, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath, situated on the shoreline to the west of an early medieval church (Cell Toma), possibly a proprietary site of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair. These small crannogs may have been the dwellings of monastic tenants or labourers.

Fig. 5.16 Photograph showing landscape at Newtownlow crannog, Co. Westmeath, from the steep esker slopes overlooking the site. Travellers along this probable early medieval routeway would have looked down upon the tenth-century crannog and ringfort at the edges of a small lake. In the twelfth century, an Anglo-Norman timber castle or motte was probably built on the ridge overlooking the crannog, deliberately appropriating this local power centre, thus revealing social and political changes to all those moving along the esker.

Fig. 5.17 Photograph of Dún na Sciath ringfort and Cróinis crannog in the water beyond it, on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. This early medieval settlement complex is situated at some remove from the early medieval ringforts and churches at Dysart to the north, at the end of a promontory into the lake. An early medieval visitor would only have seen the crannog at the last minute, when he had reached the ringfort on the ridgeline, thus enhancing the social and symbolic significance of the distant island.

Fig. 6.1a Early medieval bronze enamelled mount (fifth to seventh century AD) found on Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, on Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

Fig. 6.1b Early medieval hoard of Viking silver armlets (ninth to tenth century AD) found on Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, on Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. Most of the finds recovered from Westmeath's crannogs date to the early medieval period. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

Fig. 6.1c Early medieval silver ingots (ninth to tenth century AD) found on Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, on Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. It is likely that this silver was obtained as political

tribute, loot or plunder from Hiberno-Norse Dublin and distributed through the kingdom of Mide as gifts or within socially and politically binding agreements (source: National Museum of Ireland).

Fig. 6.2 Plan and cross-section of early medieval royal crannog of Cróinis, Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. The crannog was enclosed within an 'outer' roundwood palisade dated to the ninth century AD, while an 'inner' oak plank palisade was dated to AD 1107 ± 9 years, suggesting re-fortification in the early twelfth century AD. The ruins of a stone structure on the crannog may be the remains of a fifteenth-century towerhouse which was modified as a summer house in the nineteenth century AD (Source: Kelly, 'Observations on Irish lake dwellings').

Fig. 6.3 Cairn types of Westmeath's crannogs.

Fig. 6.4 Cairn heights of Westmeath's crannogs

Fig. 6.5 Cairn diameters of Westmeath's crannogs

Fig. 6.6 Edge boundary features on Westmeath's crannogs

Fig. 6.7 Distance to shoreline amongst Westmeath' crannogs

Fig. 6.8 Depth of water in which crannogs were built in Westmeath

Fig. 6.9 View of Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. It was probably an early medieval royal or lordly site of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair. This large, high-cairn crannog (36m in diameter, 5m in height) enclosed within an oak plank and roundwood palisade was immensely rich in artefactual evidence, with mounts, pins and armlets dating from the sixth to the tenth century AD.

Fig. 6.10 Early medieval Ballynakill 1 crannog, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. This site has produced early medieval bronze mounts, brooch fragments and animal bone. It is a small, isolated low-cairn crannog (8m in diameter, 1m in height) built on a gravelly shoal, but is submerged during the winter. It may have been the early medieval island habitation or seasonal dwelling of a 'middle class', farming community.

Fig. 6.11a Possible early medieval low-cairn crannog at Kiltoom 7, Lough Derravarragh. These intriguing sites (there are 8 similar crannogs along this shoreline) are small, stony crannogs (11-15m diameter, 1m in height), built in ankle deep water on the east shore of the lake. They are reached by short, narrow causeways and could be interpreted as small lake-shore dwellings of 'poor people' associated with the nearby church of Cell Toma (Kiltoom).

Fig. 6.11b View of fabric of stone on Kiltoom 7. These sites are similar in size, form and appearance to the early medieval crannog of Sroove, Co. Sligo. On the shore side, the site appears to be a low cairn of small stones. In contrast, the massive kerb stones on the lakeward side give it a much more impressive façade for people looking at it from boats (Photo: Rob Sands).

Fig 6.12 Location and distribution of crannogs on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath

Fig. 6.13 View of Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath from north. There are two natural islands, Turgesius Island and Nun's Island. The small islet to the west (towards distant shore) is Castle Island, a rocky cairn crannog dendrochronologically dated to the ninth century AD that has produced ecclesiastical metalwork (a bronze basin and hand-bell) and may have been a 'church crannog'.

Fig. 6.14 Early medieval palisade on Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Offaly. In Westmeath, crannogs have a range of enclosing features and boundaries, including inner and outer palisades, kerbs and stone walls. It is probable that all of these were socially significant, physically and symbolically demarcating it and defining the island space occupied by the social group.

Fig. 6.15 This small, low-cairn crannog at Derrya 1, Lough Derravarragh is accessed by a narrow causeway of stones. This pathway does not come out from the closest shoreline, but instead appears to deliberately lead a person to it from a more distant part of the shoreline, thus providing him with a constant view of the nearby early medieval royal crannog at Coolure Demesne 1 across the water.

Fig. 6.16 Donore 1 crannog, a high-cairn site in shallow water at the boggy northwest end of Lough Derravarragh. The site appears to have been connected to the Clonava Island shoreline by a wooden 'causeway' of rows of posts, running for 600m to the northwest. (Source: National Museum of Ireland Top. Files, Derrya, 1968:197).

Fig. 6.17 An early medieval dugout boat lying between the inner and outer palisade on the ninth century crannog of Ballinderry No. 2, Co. Offaly. In Westmeath, dugouts have been found around various lakeshores, particularly on Lough Derravarragh, providing both a means of access to crannogs and a way of controlling who could approach them.

Fig. 7.1. The entrance gap and causeway into the Phase 3 (early to mid-eleventh century AD) 'primary crannog' at Ballinderry No. 1, where a carefully constructed passageway 'encourages' people to move directly towards the middle of the enclosure. This 'entrance' was closed in the Phase 4 reconditioned crannog, when it is blocked by an oak plank palisade and the quay on the opposite side becomes the main entrance. (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', Pl. IV).

Fig. 7.2 The palisade and entrance gap at the early eighth-century Phase X levels at Moynagh Lough crannog. Co. Meath. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, pp 29-30.)

Fig. 7.3 Plan of early medieval Phase X (c.AD 720-748) at Moynagh Lough, outlining metalworking areas 1 and 2. The pits and furnaces were occasionally filled with clean sand, probably so that they could be returned to and re-used on the next visit to the island by the smith. (source: J. Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 121(1991), pp 5-26, Fig. 8).

Fig. 7.4 Clay mould fragments used for casting copper-alloy rings and brooches from the early medieval Phase X levels at Moynagh Lough, along with a pennanular brooch with bird's head terminals from Phase W (source: J. Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 121(1991), pp 5-26, Fig. 8).

Fig. 7.5 View of early medieval iron-working crannog at Bofeenaun (Lough More) crannog, Co. Mayo. The islet was situated in an isolated mountain valley location and was seemingly devoted (at least in its early ninth-century occupation) to the processing of iron ore, the smithing of bloom and the forging of iron objects. An island location may have enabled the smith to preserve the arcane secrets of his trade (Photo: Christy Lawless, 1991).

Fig. 7.6 Plan of early medieval iron-working crannog at Bofeenaun, Co. Mayo. The distribution of slag, stone mortars and other waste indicates that the main industrial activities took place against the palisade, to the right as one entered the site. This is similar to the copper-alloy working activities on Moynagh Lough (to the right, inside the entrance and beside the palisade), while at Lagore, metalworking activity was also concentrated at the edge of the site. (Source: M. Keane, 'The crannog' in *Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit Transactions*, 4 (1995), pp 167-82, Fig. 15).

Fig. 7.7 Most excavated early medieval crannogs have produced deep and rich middens of animal bone, rubbish and broken and discarded artefacts. These middens were often located outside the palisades, close to the entrances of the sites. In Westmeath, middens of deposits of animal bone can be identified on many sites (e.g. Newtownlow, Ballinderry No. 1, Ballynakill, Dryderstown). At the early medieval crannog at Coolure Demesne 1, on Lough Derravarragh, there is an extensive spread of animal bone in the water beside the oak plank palisade.

Fig. 7.8 Detail of broken and animal bone (cattle, pig, sheep/goat and some horse) on early medieval crannog at Coolure Demesne 1, Lough Derravarragh.

Fig. 7.9 The Phase 2 'Primary Crannog' house at the early medieval crannog of Ballinderry No. 1, Co. Westmeath. This house (dated to the mid eleventh century AD) was 5m in diameter, with a floor of brushwood and clay. It was surrounded by a horse-shoe shaped timber walkway, and was located inside a modestly-sized, palisaded (15m diameter) crannog (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', Pl. XIII).

Fig. 7.10 View of Phase Y (mid eighth-century) house at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. (Photo: John Bradley).

Fig. 7.11a Plan of Phase Y (mid eighth-century) house at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. The house saw frequent re-use of its central hearths, and re-layering of its floors with clay, gravel and bone. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, pp 29-30).

Fig. 7.11b Reconstruction of Phase Y (mid eighth-century) house at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. Internally, there were beds and benches, and the distribution of food debris, metalworking waste and personal objects and equipment hints at the social organisation of its internal spaces (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, pp 29-30).

Fig. 7.12 Distribution of 'domestic finds' (e.g. pottery, whetstones, knives) within the Moynagh Lough house, indicating that such activity was predominantly carried out in the southern half of the house, a zone seemingly associated amongst many societies with daily, 'bright' or domestic life (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 22).

Fig. 7.13 Distribution of 'personal objects' (e.g. bronze pins, bone pins, glass beads, comb, drinking horn terminal) within the Moynagh Lough house, indicating a slightly wider dispersal of objects, but still with a trend to the south. It is possible that the use of beds and benches there may have led to the occasional loss of personal items of adornment. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 25).

Fig. 7.14 Distribution of 'ironworking finds' (e.g. iron blobs, ingots, furnace bottoms, slag) within the Moynagh Lough house, indicating a striking emphasis on the northern half of the house. Amongst many societies, this is the dark half, associated with cold, night and wintertime. It is possible that ironworking waste, associated with danger and otherworldly forces, was consigned to this zone when the house floors were being relaid. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 24).

Fig. 7.15 Distribution of 'miscellaneous finds' (e.g. iron pieces, flint, stone and bone objects) within the Moynagh Lough house. The iron finds are again found in the north, while flint objects were typically found around the central hearth or fireplace. Being used to light fires, it would be natural for such objects to fall there. Perhaps, thereafter when people were re-lighting the fire they could search the floor around them for 'strike-a-lights'. Some flint objects (especially prehistoric arrowheads) may also have been considered as magical items, used for preserving food and protecting the house. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 23).

List of Appendices (in volume 2)

Appendix 1: A select bibliography of early medieval references to crannogs, islands and lakes

Appendix 2: A catalogue of crannogs in Westmeath

Appendix 3: A gazetteer of early medieval crannogs in Ireland

Abbreviations

Bibliography

Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I would like to warmly thank John Bradley, my supervisor for all his advice, encouragement and comments, both in the research for this thesis over the years, and for his work on the final text. I am also very grateful to Prof. R.V. Comerford, Head of Department, for all his patience, comments and support, and to all the lecturers and staff of the Dept. of Modern History, NUI Maynooth, particularly Colmáin Etchingham, Cathy Swift and Anne Murphy. I would also like to express my gratitude to the Irish Research Council for Humanities and Social Sciences (IRCHSS) for the award of a Senior Research Scholarship in 2002/2003, which truly enabled me to finally finish this Ph.D. I also want to thank Prof. Gabriel Cooney for his advice, personal encouragement and practical support throughout the year of my sabbatical from the Dept. of Archaeology, UCD, making me all the more eager to get back.

Many people have offered comments, provided me with articles or access to their unpublished reports, engaged with me in discussions and inspired me with their ideas. They include Barry Raftery, Gabriel Cooney, Rob Sands, Jo Brück, Tadhg O’Keeffe, Dorothy Kelly, Mel Giles, Graeme Warren, Stephen Harrison, Sharon Greene, Máirín Ní Cheallaigh (Dept. of Archaeology, UCD), Conor Newman, Kieran O’Conor, Billy O’Brien, Elizabeth Fitzpatrick (Dept. of Archaeology, NUIG), Barra Ó Donnabháin (Dept. of Archaeology, UCC), Charles Doherty, Elva Johnston (Dept. of Medieval History, UCD), Edel Bhreathnach (Michael Ó Cléirigh Centre, UCD), Finbar McCormick, Dave Brown, John O’Neill, Ian Armit, Niki Whitehouse, Eileen Murphy and Emily Murray (School of Archaeology and Palaeoecology, Queen’s University Belfast), Colin Breen, Rory Quinn (Centre for Maritime Archaeology, University of Ulster at Coleraine), Fraser Mitchell (Dept. of Botany, Trinity College, Dublin), Annaba Kilfeather, Niall Brady and Christina Fredengren (The Discovery Programme), Claire Foley and Brian Williams (Built Heritage, Environment and Heritage Service (DoENI, Belfast) and Angele Smith (Dept. of Anthropology, UNBC, Canada), Richard Warner and Cormac Bourke (Ulster Museum), Noel Dunne (Kildare County Council) and David Blair Gibson.

I also thank Steve Mandal (CRDS), Emmett Byrnes (Forestry Service), Jim Boyle (New York University), Niall Gregory (Valerie J. Keeley and Co.), Jon Henderson (Nottingham University), Alex Hale (RCHMS, Edinburgh), Tony Brown, Bryony Coles, John Coles and

Robert van de Noort (School of Geography and Archaeology, University of Exeter), Niamh Whitfield, Aideen Ireland (National Archives), Fergus Kelly (Dublin Institute of Advanced Studies), and Michael Ryan (Chester Beatty Library), Victor Buckley, Tom Condit and Fionbarr Moore (National Monuments Section, Dept. of Environment and Local Government). I also thank the many students of my second-year early medieval settlement and society courses, my third-year lake-dwellings and wetland archaeology courses, as well as MA students in landscape archaeology for what I have learned from them.

During my usually solitary archaeological fieldwork in Westmeath in Summer 2002 and Summer 2003, I was occasionally but ably assisted by Rob Sands (on Lough Derravarragh) and by my father, John O'Sullivan (on Lough Ennell), and also during a useful winter fieldtrip to Lough Derravarragh by Graeme Warren, Mel Giles and Mark Edmonds. In previous years, I was greatly assisted in crannog surveys and underwater diving by Donal Boland (Management for Archaeology Underwater). In Westmeath, I was also kindly helped by Richard McCabe, of Coolure Demesne (who brought me on a boat tour of the Lough Derravarragh one summer's day, giving me a native's perspective on its islands and shoreline. I also thank local landowners for permission to cross their lands on the way to the lakes, particularly Lady Pakenham, Tullynally Castle, Castlepollard who provided me with permission to work within the Pakenham estates. I thank Paul Smith (Donore) and Jim Gavigan (Liliput) for renting me boats for use on the lakes, and for advice on weather, winds and practicalities of boat usage. During my fieldwork, I lived for months with the Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit (UCD) in Mullingar, and would like to thank Conor MacDermott, Cara Murray, Cathy Moore and Michael Stanley for their help and commentary on my sites, as well as their friendly company.

Many people have helped me in different practical ways with my research. I am very grateful to the director and staff of the Dept. of Antiquities, National Museum of Ireland, particularly Eamonn Kelly, Mary Cahill, Ragnaill Ó Floinn and Andrew Halpin. I also want to thank Annaba Kilfeather, who provided me with information from her own, parallel research on NMI finds registers. I also thank the staff of the National Monuments Section, Dept. of Environment and Local Government, particularly Geraldine Crowley, for her help with my use of the Westmeath RMP archives and files. I thank Siobhan O'Rafferty (Royal Irish Academy), Colette O'Riordain (Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland), the staff of UCD library and the librarians of the Westmeath County Library, Mullingar for their assistance. I also thank John Bradley for access to the Moynagh Lough crannog excavations archives and I

would like to especially thank Barry Raftery for providing me with access to the unpublished Rathtinaun site archive, and for discussing various aspects of this fascinating site.

I thank Rob Sands (UCD) and Niklas Parsson for their help with Macintosh computers, memory, scanning procedures and advice about Adobe Photoshop and Adobe Illustrator images. I am very grateful to Anthony Cairns (The Discovery Programme) for his help with GIS and for generously providing me with background digital map images of Westmeath, as well as scans of Ordnance Survey six-inch maps. I thank Nick Maxwell (Wordwell) for providing me with the original scanned images from my archaeology of lake settlement monograph, some of which are used again in this thesis. I am most grateful to Conor MacDermott (Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit, UCD) for his time and patience in helping me with reducing sizeable map images, for help in re-drawing my original site plans and for introducing me to the intricacies of Adobe Illustrator. I also thank Michael Potterton for his advice and comments on thesis format, bibliographies and general advice about the final production of the thesis.

Finally, during the long haul of writing this thesis, I have been supported in many real ways by the humour, encouragement and kindness of my friends, including Fergal Doyle, Seamus Taaffe, Miriam MacAllinney, Caroline Casey, John Bradley, Colin Breen, Aoife Daly, Rob Sands, as well as my parents John O'Sullivan and Kathleen O'Sullivan. Finally, I thank my best friend, Mary B. Deevy, for all her support and humour in the writing and completion of this PhD. Now, we can finally get on with tearing our house apart and all the shed building, wall painting and lawn mowing that has been put off.

Aidan O'Sullivan,
November 1st, 2003
Longwood Avenue, Dublin.

Chapter 1

Introduction

Introduction

In early medieval Ireland, people built and lived on small islets of stone, earth and wood situated in the watery shallows of lakes. These artificial islands, known to modern scholars as crannogs, are amongst the most remarkable and evocative features of the Irish archaeological landscape, mysterious, tree-clad islands often situated on isolated lakeshores. Over the years, Irish crannog studies have waxed and waned, but their contribution to our understanding of the past has been immeasurable. Since the nineteenth century, they have been the focus of antiquarian and archaeological investigation, and various twentieth-century archaeological excavations have revealed evidence for their form, structures, houses, pathways, fences, pits, working areas, and the debris of crafts, domestic activity and industrial production. Archaeological surveys have indicated their diversity of size, morphology, siting and location, while also producing literally thousands of objects from their wave-eroded surfaces.

But crannogs remain peculiar places. To modern eyes, these islets were awkward of access, damp and uncomfortably exposed to the rain, wind and waves, and seemingly illogical in their location. Faced with this odd choice of dwelling place, scholars have interpreted crannogs using a modern view of environment and landscape, or with the perception of what were the main concerns of early medieval society. Thence, scholars have tended to see crannogs as places used for defensive refuge or safety at times of conflict (military or strategic roles), or as places used to display power and wealth to the wider community (i.e. social display). However, while these explanations are often reasonable and partly true, scholars rarely attempt to understand what early medieval communities were doing when they constructed and used these islands, or reconstruct a sense of how people perceived or understood them.

The archaeology and history of crannogs in early medieval Ireland

What is the current state of knowledge and understanding of crannogs in early medieval Ireland? It is certainly true that crannogs have had a long history of antiquarian and archaeological scholarship in Ireland, with previous academic debates revolving around

questions of origins, chronology, morphology and their diverse social and economic roles in the early Irish landscape.¹ In terms of definition or categorisation, crannogs have traditionally been defined as artificial islets of stone, timber and soil, usually circular or oval in plan, enclosed within a wooden palisade. However, recognising that modern archaeological classifications are more about the ordering of information than the reality of life in the past, it might be useful to adopt a broader definition of the term 'crannog' and consider those stone cairns without palisades, deliberately enhanced natural islands, as well as cairns, mounds and rock platforms situated along lakeshore edges (i.e. not necessarily surrounded by water). In fact, it will be argued in this study that a more fruitful approach is to explore what *early medieval communities* thought about islands, and to move from their perceptions and imagination to an archaeological discussion of crannogs as islands made by people.

The 'origins' and 'chronology' of crannogs have been discussed in terms of tracing the earliest dates for crannog construction and thereafter the apparent sequence of their use across time. It has largely been reconstructed through the use of archaeological excavations, artefactual studies and latterly, radiocarbon and dendrochronological dating.² In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the use of crannogs in Ireland was usually seen as a long-lived phenomenon (dating back to prehistory) but with a particularly intensive phase of activity in the Middle Ages. In recent decades, dendrochronological dates from Ulster crannogs, allied with Lynn's influential paper on 'early crannogs' led to the widespread belief in the 1980s that crannogs, as narrowly defined, were only first constructed in the sixth and seventh centuries AD.³ These early medieval crannogs were believed to be quite different from Bronze Age lake dwellings,

¹ For recent overviews of crannogs in Ireland, see E.P. Kelly, 'Observations on Irish lake-dwellings' in Catherine Karkov and Robert Farrell (eds.), *Studies in insular art and archaeology*. American Early Medieval Studies 1, (Cornell, 1991), pp 81-98; E.P. Kelly, 'Crannógs' in Michael Ryan (ed.), *The illustrated archaeology of Ireland*, (Dublin, 1991), pp 120-3; R.B. Warner, 'On crannógs and kings: (part 1)' in *U.J.A.*, 57 (1994), pp 61-9; Aidan O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement in Ireland* (Dublin, 1998); Aidan O'Sullivan, *Crannogs: Lake-dwellings in early Ireland* (Dublin, 2000); Aidan O'Sullivan, 'Crannogs in late medieval Gaelic Ireland, c.1350-c.1650' in P.J. Duffy, D. Edwards and E. Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Gaelic Ireland: land, lordship and settlement, c. 1250-c.1650* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 397-417; Christina Fredengren, *Crannogs: A study of people's interaction with lakes, with particular reference to Lough Gara in the north-west of Ireland*, (Bray, 2002).

² For the debate about the origins and chronology of crannogs, see C.J. Lynn, 'Some 'early' ring-forts and crannógs' in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 1 (1983), pp 47-58; B.A. Crone, 'Crannogs and chronologies' in *S.A.S. Proc.*, 123 (1993), pp 245-54; Margaret Keane, 'Lough More, Co. Mayo: the crannog' in *Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit Transactions: 4* (Dublin, 1995), pp 167-82; O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 131-3; Christina Fredengren, 'Iron Age crannogs in Lough Gara' in *Arch. Ire.* 14, no. 2, (2000), pp 26-8.

³ Of course, this raises the obvious point that defining crannogs in a particular way, then arguing about the earliest use of what you have just defined, is ultimately an academic debate in more ways than one. Much of the debate about crannog chronology revolves around such semantics.

which were seen to be lake-edge enclosures rather than artificial islets (although several authors pointed out that this distinction was not at all apparent in the archaeological evidence).⁴ Some archaeologists suggested that the origins of the idea of crannogs were an outcome of the strong cultural connections between Ireland and Scotland (where crannogs appear to have been built a few centuries before) in the early Middle Ages. However, recent studies have shown that crannogs - small palisaded islets in open-water - were also being built in the Late Bronze Age, early Middle Ages and late medieval period. Nevertheless, it is still clear from a wide range of archaeological, artefactual and dendrochronological evidence, and even from the most recent dating programmes, that the most intensive phases of crannog building, occupation and abandonment were usually within the early Middle Ages. It is now also clear that crannogs were built or certainly re-occupied in the later Middle Ages, variously being used as lordly sites, prisons, ammunition stores and as places to keep silver and gold plate. Some smaller crannog islets and platforms may have been peasant seasonal dwellings or refuges for the poor or hideouts for outlaws, some being used as late as the eighteenth century.⁵ However, this simple recitation of sequences or periods of intensity hardly begins to explore the dynamic use of the past and the role of memory in past societies.

The geographical distribution of Irish crannogs is now broadly understood (Fig. 1.1). Since the pioneering crannog surveys of Wakeman in the north-west,⁶ Kinahan in the west,⁷ and Davies in south Ulster,⁸ the more recent work of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland in the Republic (conducted by National Monuments Section, Dúchas – the Heritage Service)⁹ and the county surveys (conducted by the Environment and Heritage

⁴ In a previous review, it was pointed out that ‘the structural differences between (Bronze Age lake settlements) and crannógs could be overstated, some early Historic sites were quite small with little evidence for houses, while some Bronze Age settlements were in contrast constructed of large amounts of timber, brushwood, stone paving and peats with substantial house platforms’, Aidan O’Sullivan, ‘Interpreting the archaeology of Bronze Age lake settlements’ in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 8 (1998), pp 115-121, at p. 115.

⁵ Recent discussions of late medieval use of crannogs include, O’Sullivan, ‘Crannogs in late medieval Gaelic Ireland’, pp 397-417; Aidan O’Sullivan, ‘Crannogs – places of resistance in the contested landscapes of early modern Ireland’ in Barbara Bender and Margot Winer (eds.), *Contested landscapes: landscapes of movement and exile* (Oxford, 2001), pp 87-101.

⁶ See, for example, W.F. Wakeman, ‘The crannogs in Lough Eyes, Co. Fermanagh’ in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 11 (1870-1871), pp 553-64; W.F. Wakeman, ‘Observations on the principal crannogs of Fermanagh’ in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 2 (1872), p. 216.

⁷ G.H. Kinahan, ‘On crannóges in Lough Rea’ in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 8c (1861-1864), pp 412-27.

⁸ Oliver Davies, ‘Contributions to the study of crannógs in south Ulster’ in *U.J.A.*, 5 (1942), pp 14-30.

⁹ Recent archaeological surveys that include sections on crannogs include, Anna Brindley, *Archaeological inventory of County Monaghan* (Dublin, 1986); Paul Gosling, *Archaeological inventory of County Galway: Volume I - West Galway* (Dublin, 1993); O. Alcock, C. de hÓra and P. Gosling, *Archaeological Inventory of County Galway: Volume II - North Galway*, (Dublin, 1999); Patrick O’Donovan, *Archaeological inventory of County Cavan* (Dublin, 1995).

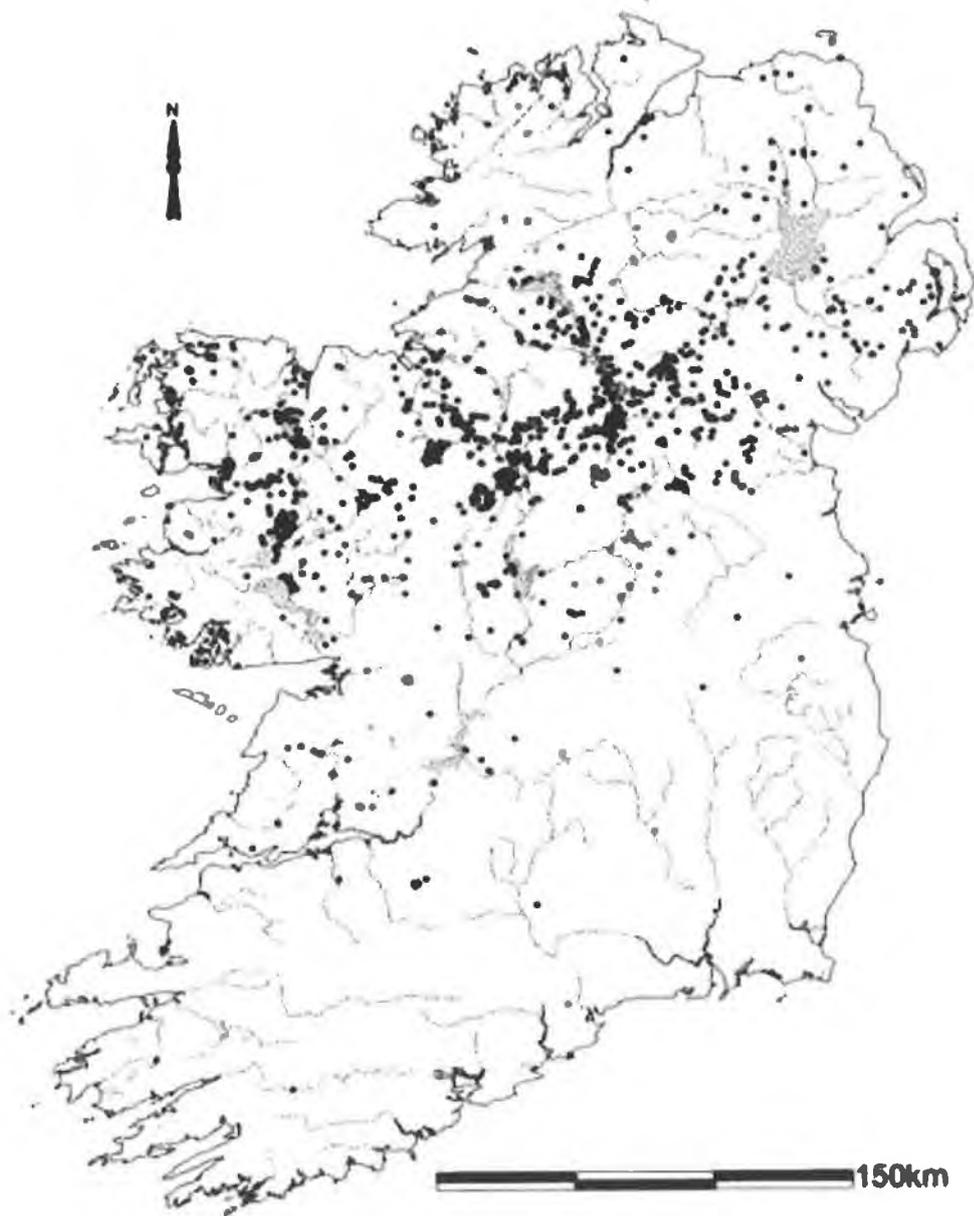


Fig. 1.1 Map showing distribution of crannogs in Ireland, based on records of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland and the Environment and Heritage Service, Northern Ireland. (Source: Aidan O'Sullivan, *Crannogs: Lake dwellings of early Ireland*).

Service) in Northern Ireland have established that there are at least 1200 registered sites.¹⁰ However, this figure must be seen as a low estimate given the lack of dedicated archaeological surveys (crannogs can easily be obscured by wetland vegetation or by even shallow depths of water). Unsurprisingly, given the fact that they are by definition, lake dwellings, they tend to be found in those parts of Ireland where there are lakes. Crannogs

¹⁰ V.M. Buckley, 'The National Archive as a research tool' in *IAPA Newsletter* 23 (1996), p. 8.

are widely distributed across the midlands, northwest, west and north of Ireland. They are particularly concentrated in the drumlin lakes of Cavan, Monaghan, Leitrim and Roscommon and Fermanagh. Crannogs are more dispersed across the west and northeast, although concentrations can be identified, such as in Lough Conn, Lough Cullin and around Castlebar Lough, Co. Mayo. Crannogs are known in every county of Northern Ireland, in a belt stretching from Fermanagh, through south Tyrone and Armagh to mid-Down, with particular concentrations in Monaghan and Cavan. Other regions have smaller numbers widely dispersed, but a few crannogs have been identified in the south and east.

Crannogs tend to be found on the smaller lakes, being infrequent or rare on large midland lakes of the River Shannon system (e.g. Lough Ree and Lough Derg), while there are also few on Lower Lough Erne and Lough Neagh. There are particular concentrations of crannogs on Lough Carra and Lough Conn, Co. Mayo, Lough Gara, Co. Sligo, Drumhallow Lough, Co. Roscommon and Lough Oughter, Co. Cavan. Smaller lakes can have either one crannog or a small group of them, such as on Lough Eyes and Drumgay Lough, Co. Fermanagh. On some larger lakes, such as Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath and Lough Sheelin, Co. Cavan, they are distributed along the shoreline at regular intervals. Crannogs are situated in various different types of modern environment, both deep and shallow lake-waters, lakeshore and peatlands. A smaller number of crannogs have been found in rivers, estuaries and in coastal wetlands.

Recent archaeological surveys indicate that crannogs vary widely in morphology and construction, ranging in size from relatively large sites 18-25m in diameter, to smaller mounds 8-10m in diameter. Crannogs of various sizes and types can be located in close proximity, suggesting variously, sequences of development or contemporaneity of usage. There appears to be both regional and local variations in construction, but most appear to have been built of layers of stone boulders, small to medium-sized cobble stones, branches and timber, lake-marl and other organic debris. Crannogs also produce evidence, from both archaeological survey and excavation, for a wide range of other structures, such as cairns, level upper platforms, houses, working spaces, middens, wooden revetments, palisades, and stone walls, defined entrance s, jetties, pathways and stone causeways (Fig. 1.2). Crannogs have also produced large assemblages of artefacts, both as a result of archaeological excavation and as discoveries made both accidentally or by design (e.g. treasure hunters in the 1980s). These material assemblages have included items of clothing (shoes, textiles), personal adornment (brooches, pins, rings), weaponry (swords, spearheads, axes, shields), domestic equipment (knives, chisels, axes).



Fig. 1.2. Reconstruction drawing of a hypothetical early medieval crannog, based on evidence from sites in the north midlands. The crannog is a cairn of stone laid over a wooden foundation, with sand and clay spread across its upper surface. It is accessed by a stone causeway which leads through the shallow water to the entrance and is enclosed within an 'inner' roundwood palisade, while the remnants of an ancient, rotting palisade revets the cairn edge at the water level. Out in the water, there is another 'outer' palisade, defining a watery space around the island. Internally, the crannog has a roundhouse, an outside hearth and working spaces. It will be proposed in this thesis that all this evidence can be interpreted in social and ideological terms (drawing: Aidan O'Sullivan).

Traditionally, scholars have interpreted the social and economic 'function' of crannogs from what might be called a common-sense reading of what is deemed to be the essential properties of a crannog (i.e. high visibility, difficulty of access, laboriousness of construction, etc). Thence, they have often been seen as island strongholds or defensive refuges, occupied at times of danger, and there is certainly plenty of early medieval (and later) historical evidence that many were attacked and burned during raids and warfare.¹¹ When this is combined with the occasional archaeological evidence for weaponry and the impressive scale of their timber and roundwood palisades, then it is easy to see why scholars have often suggested a military or fortress role for them. Both archaeology and early Irish historical sources also suggest that at least some crannogs were high-status or even royal sites, used for feasting, as re-distribution centres for the patronage of crafts and industry, and the projection through their size and impressive architecture the power and wealth of their owners.¹² Early medieval crannogs such as Lagore, Co. Meath and

¹¹ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 138-9.

¹² Recent books and articles that explore the use of crannogs by social elites include, Warner, 'On crannogs and kings', pp 61-9; Kelly, 'Observations on Irish lake-dwellings', pp 81-98; Nancy Edwards, *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland* (London, 1990), pp 34-48; H.C. Mytum, *The*

Island MacHugh, Co. Tyrone certainly could be interpreted as the island residences of kings or nobles, perhaps being used as summer lodges, public assembly places and as places of refuge at times of danger. Early medieval crannogs have also been associated with the patronage and control of craft production (typically metalworking). For instance, Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, a probable lordly crannog, particularly during its mid-eighth century occupation phase, was clearly a place where various specialist craft workers resided and worked, while Bofeenaun crannog, on Lough More, Co. Mayo appears to have been devoted to the processing of iron ore.¹³ On the other hand, it is clear from archaeological surveys that most crannogs were essentially small island or lakeshore dwellings, occupied at various times by different people, not necessarily of high social status. Recent archaeological excavations at Sroove, on Lough Gara, Co. Sligo have suggested that some small crannogs were the habitations of social groups or households who had little wealth or political power.¹⁴ In this and other archaeological surveys around Ireland, it has also been demonstrated that many crannogs were small islets situated in shallow water, quite unlike the classic image presented by the larger early medieval 'royal sites'. Indeed, several crannogs have produced relatively modest material assemblages and could be interpreted as the island homesteads of the 'middle classes'.¹⁵ In other words, different types of crannogs were built, used and occupied by various social classes in early medieval Ireland.

Moreover, while there is commonly an image of early medieval crannogs as secular dwellings, given the significant role of the church in the early medieval settlement landscape, it is also likely that many were used by ecclesiastical communities. It is possible that discoveries in recent decades of early medieval ecclesiastical metalwork (handbells, crosses and bookshrines) on some midlands crannogs (occasionally in proximity to actual church sites and monasteries) suggests their use as safe or restricted storage places for relics or perhaps even as island hermitages.¹⁶ Others may have been fishing or industrial platforms, used periodically, seasonally or for particular specific tasks. Finally, it should be allowed that some early medieval crannogs might not have

origins of Early Christian Ireland (London, 1992); O'Sullivan, *Crannogs*, pp 43-5.

¹³ John Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 111 (1991), pp 5-26; John Bradley, 'Moynagh Lough: an insular workshop of the second quarter of the 8th century' in R. M. Spearman and J. Higgitt (eds.), *The age of migrating ideas* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp 74-81; Keane 'Lough More', pp 167-182.

¹⁴ Christina Fredengren, 'Poor people's crannogs' in *Arch. Ire.*, 15, no. 4, (2001), pp 24-5.

¹⁵ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 129-47; A.E.P. Collins and B. Proudfoot, 'A trial excavation at Clea Lakes crannóg, Co. Down' in *U.J.A.*, 22 (1959), pp 92-101; A.E.P. Collins, 'Excavations at Lough Faughan crannog, Co. Down, 1950-51' in *U.J.A.*, 18 (1955), pp 45-82; George Coffey, 'Craigyarwarren crannog' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 26c (1906), pp 109-118.

¹⁶ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 139-40; O'Sullivan, *Crannogs*, p. 30.

been dwellings at all. Some may have been boundary or routeway markers, cairns or burial mounds to commemorate battles, persons or significant events, or even by-products of other activities (e.g. temporary quarries for building stone, field clearance, etc). On the other hand, virtually every detailed site investigation of an Irish early medieval crannog has revealed at least some evidence for what might be called 'settlement activity'. In other words, while there are several traditional and useful explanations of the uses of early medieval crannogs, largely revolving around ideas of 'island refuges', the 'social display of power' and of 'island dwellings', it is likely that depending on their size, location and history of use, different crannogs were used in different ways.

Aims and objectives of this thesis

The aims and objectives of this thesis are to move these debates onwards and to attempt to explore the social and ideological role of crannogs within early medieval society. Briefly stated, the aims and objectives of this thesis are,

- 1) *To evaluate and critique previous research on early medieval crannogs in Ireland, and to suggest innovative approaches to them based on recent developments in archaeology, early Irish history, anthropology and sociology*
- 2) *To explore the social and ideological role of crannogs in early medieval Ireland by reconstructing how they were understood, used and experienced as island dwellings in the early medieval landscape.*
- 3) *To explore these ideas and approaches in the context of landscape, local and site-oriented archaeological and historical research within a defined regional study area in the Irish midlands.*

What is meant by the 'social role' of crannogs? It is clear from historical and archaeological evidence that people in early medieval Ireland lived in a world where different social relationships and social identities profoundly structured and influenced the progress of their lives. Scholars of early medieval Ireland have long been familiar with the social hierarchies and inequalities of power and status described in the historical sources. It is also true that their ethnicity, gender, kinship, social role, collective sense of history and the past and their identification with place shaped people's social identities. In recent years, archaeologists influenced by developments in archaeological theory, sociology and anthropology have sought to explore how people in the past had (or did not have) the ability to construct, negotiate and resist these social identities through their dynamic and active use and manipulation of places, objects and other forms of material culture.

This thesis will explore how early medieval crannogs, as distinctive bounded island spaces, were used by people to construct and negotiate such social relationships and identities (in terms of social hierarchy, status, gender, kinship and age) within the communities in which they lived. This is certainly a subject of growing interest in settlement and landscape studies. For instance, it has recently been suggested that late medieval castles, while also significant both in terms of military and social ostentation, can usefully be interpreted as theatre 'stages' for the control of social encounters and as 'backdrops' before which, and around, the social identities of both inhabitants and visitors were performed or 'played out' in the late Middle Ages.¹⁷ Johnson argues that just as theatre stages are ordered to manipulate people's perception of a play, so the individual architectural features (i.e. deceptively defensive moats and walls, impressive gateways to manipulate people's experiences upon arrival, halls for formal reception, and so on) and furniture of a castle were used to manage social encounters. Indeed, as the social identities of the actors changed (i.e. in terms of social status or gender), so did the meanings of the physical structures, as different people (men, women, lords, lords and labourers, etc.) understood the world in different ways. It might be suggested that early medieval crannogs could also be thought about as places or venues for the enactment and negotiation of social relationships. Indeed they are essentially similar to late medieval castles, being deliberately built islands of timber and stone, with palisades, causeways, gateways and watery surrounds, all serving to enclose or define various social, domestic and economic spaces.

However, to understand the social role of crannogs in early medieval Irish society, it will be necessary to also explore the ideological role of crannogs. In this thesis, it will be argued that this can be achieved by reconstructing how early medieval communities perceived and understood islands, and by investigating how such knowledge and perceptions could have been used to construct and negotiate the social identities of the people that built, used and saw them - king, lord, labourer and slave, husband and wife, warrior, craftsman and farmer. Ideology could be described as the set of beliefs or imaginary speculations by which a society orders reality so as to render it intelligible. In socio-political terms, it could also be described as the body of ideas that reflect the beliefs and interests of a society, or particular social group within it, often forming the basis for political action. Marxist archaeologists have suggested that ideological beliefs

¹⁷ Matthew Johnson, *Behind the castle gate: from medieval to Renaissance* (London, 2002), p 3; Ideas about architecture as an arena for managed social encounters are common in recent archaeological literature, see Michael Parker Pearson and Colin Richards (ed.) *Architecture and order: approaches to social space* (London and New York, 1994).

were typically used by powerful elites in the past (and in the present) to mask inequalities, or to present the existing social order as something timeless, 'natural' or inevitable, in other words to legitimate their interests and contemporary social hierarchies.¹⁸ This is certainly one way of interpreting people's ideas about islands in the early Middle Ages, as there is often an emphasis in the historical sources on heroes, kings and saints who used islands to promote their own social and economic positions. However, other scholars have doubted whether ideas can 'dupe' an entire population. Instead, ideologies may serve to enhance the solidarity of distinct social groups.¹⁹ It will also be argued in this study that different early medieval social groups had a range of beliefs about islands in the early Middle Ages, occasionally using them to challenge and resist the social order.

By adopting interpretative approaches to crannogs in the early medieval period, this thesis will attempt a broader study of how social identities were created, contested and negotiated within early medieval communities. It will also investigate the different ways that people in early medieval Ireland perceived and understood the settlement landscape in which they lived, how this would have been contingent on social rank, kinship and gender and how it may have changed across time. This thesis aims to adopt new theoretical and methodological approaches to the early Middle Ages and re-introduce people into the archaeological narratives that are written about settlements and dwelling places.

Regional and local perspectives

This thesis will study crannogs at a range of geographical scales, island-wide, regional and local. In recent years, landscape archaeologists have suggested that this use of shifting scales of analysis can enable understanding of both the intimate and wider scales of social life and experience. The island-wide perspective is the one which archaeologists usually use, assessing national distributions, regional clusterings, attempting the large sweeping overviews of a subject. In particular, the detailed literature review carried out here will enable a critical re-use of previously published crannog excavations and surveys from around the country (or at least those regions where crannogs are found). However, this national or island-wide scale will not itself be a primary scale of analysis. Despite the fact that a concept of 'Ireland' as an island had emerged amongst an educated *élite* by the early Middle Ages, few people experienced or perceived the world at that essentially

¹⁸ Matthew Johnson, *Archaeological theory: an introduction* (Oxford and Malden, 1999), pp 94-5.

¹⁹ Julian Thomas, 'Introduction: the polarities of post-processual archaeology' in Julian Thomas (ed.)

abstract scale. The thesis through integrated and detailed studies of regional and local study areas, will interpret crannogs at the geographical scales at which they would have been seen, used and understood in early medieval Ireland.

While different regional studies will be discussed, the thesis will concentrate on Westmeath, in the north midland lakeland region. This region roughly corresponds to the early medieval kingdom of *Mide* (particularly between the sixth and the tenth centuries AD). It is an interesting region for a number of reasons. Certainly, it is often thought of as a place that is dominated by its lakelands, but it also has a significant topographical variability, with a physical landscape ranging from low hills, to rolling eskers and grasslands, down to its raised bogs, fens and lakes. In building and using crannogs in this landscape, people were deliberately choosing to live on islands instead of the drylands. The use of crannogs in this region has as much to do with human choice and agency, as with the realities of the physical landscape (in contrast to Leitrim, Cavan or Monaghan, say, where there are so many lakes, that island life would have been almost inevitable).

It is also useful that the region is richly provided for in a long-standing tradition of historical research on the early medieval period. Previous historical and placename studies on the origins of the baronies, parishes and townlands of the region provide much information on early population groups.²⁰ Most studies have concentrated on the emergence and political activities of the Clann Cholmáin, one of the dominant ruling lineage amongst the dynasties of the Southern Uí Néill between the eighth and the eleventh centuries AD. There has also been some research on ecclesiastical settlement and politics. For example, it has long been known that the twelfth-century saint's life, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*, describes much of the early medieval settlement landscape around Lough Ennell, with several references to its crannogs and islands.²¹ The region also has great potential in terms of the early medieval archaeological

Interpretive archaeology: a reader (London and New York, 2000), pp 10-12.

²⁰ For general introductions to early medieval history of Westmeath, see F.J. Byrne *Irish kings and high-kings* (London 1973) pp 87-105; for historical studies of the Westmeath region see, Paul Walsh *The placenames of Westmeath*, (Dublin 1957); for recent studies, see A.S Mac Shamháin 'Nebulae discutuntur? The emergence of Clann Cholmáin, sixth-eighth centuries' in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne*. (Dublin, 1999), pp 83-97; C.E. Karkov and J. Ruffing 'The southern Uí Néill and the political landscape of Lough Ennell in *Peritia* 11 (1997), pp 336-358; Thomas Charles-Edwards, 'The Uí Néill 695-743: the rise and fall of dynasties' in *Peritia* 16 (2002), pp 396-418.

²¹ Kuno Meyer (ed. and trans.), *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*, Todd Lect Ser 17 (Dublin 1911); Paul Walsh, 'The topography of Betha Colmáin' in *Z.C.P.* 8 (1912), pp 568-82.

record.²² Previous archaeological surveys in Westmeath have produced evidence for a rich early medieval archaeological landscape, particularly in terms of ringforts, churches, monastic islands, holy wells and other sites. Unfortunately, there have been surprisingly few publications on the early medieval archaeology of Westmeath, so this thesis reviews for the first time the previously unpublished archival sources held by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland. The extensive finds' catalogues and topographical archives held in the National Museum of Ireland will also be used to indicate the region's long-lived human history.

However, although regional studies are important, providing a sense of the broader, historical patterns and political developments across a geographical area, it must be remembered that they still do not always engage with the reality of life for people in the past. In the early Middle Ages, it was at the *local* geographical scale that people would have spent most of their time; living and working around the dwelling, moving out into the fields to work the land, or occasionally travelling further afield for public occasions such as fairs and assemblies. People dwelled in, moved through and understood worlds that were barely a few miles across. It is at this local scale that social identities were constructed, community relationships negotiated. For this reason, local and site studies will be of primary importance in this thesis. The primary local study presented in this thesis is an analysis of the early medieval settlement landscapes around Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. The lake is useful to study for a number of reasons. Although it is not particularly large, it has an unusually variable local geology, soils, topography (bogs, level grassland, steep slopes and hills), while the lakebed itself ranges from extensive shallows (1m in depth at north end) to a deep, steep-sided trough (30m depth) at the southern end. It has extensive archaeological evidence for long-term settlement around the lake, ranging in date from the Late Mesolithic (c.4500 BC), Bronze Age, early Middle Ages, late medieval and post-medieval periods. The early medieval settlement evidence is also rich, including a number of early medieval crannogs, ringforts and churches, all of which have produced artefacts of early medieval date. Lough Derravarragh is also interesting, because it is on a significant regional political boundary, between the kingdoms of the Clann Cholmáin and those of north Tethbae. Moreover the congruence of three baronial boundaries along the lake (Fore, Moygoish and Corkaree) hint that the lake itself also served as an early medieval boundary between kingdoms. As will be argued in this thesis, important things happen at boundaries, and crannogs and islands were often places at the edge of people's worlds.

²² D.L. Swan, 'The Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of county Westmeath' in John Bradley (ed.),

Exploring island life in the early Middle Ages

This thesis aims to explore the social and ideological role of crannogs within the early medieval period (i.e. AD 400-1100), reconstructing the temporal rhythms of crannog building, habitation and abandonment from the sixth to the twelfth centuries AD. This will be in contrast to the two recent major studies that have discussed the ways that crannogs and lake dwellings were used in Ireland from prehistory up until modern times.²³ Multi-period archaeological landscape narratives that span thousands of years are immensely interesting and useful studies, often revealing patterns in how radically different cultures and societies understood and shaped their worlds. They can reveal aspects of long-term social and environmental change, as well as the deep, underlying rhythms and structures of life in particular landscapes. However, in sprawling across vast time-spans (i.e. from the Mesolithic to the post-medieval period), multi-period studies can tend to produce culturally ‘thin’ and ultimately unsatisfying interpretations of the past. Each chapter becomes a small discussion of a particular period, without really getting to grips with the society, beliefs and practices of that time.

It is hoped that by concentrating in this thesis on a particular era and society (i.e. that of early medieval Ireland), and by using multidisciplinary approaches (archaeology, early Irish history, sociology and anthropological studies) to a specific aspect of that society (the building and inhabitation of islands), it will be possible to write a different history of Irish crannogs. This thesis aims for what the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz famously referred to as the ‘thick’, multi-layered description of a culture.²⁴ In the case of this thesis, this ‘thick’ description will explore the social and ideological uses of islands amongst the early medieval Irish; through the integration of many different strands of evidence about social identity, power and ideology, *mentalités*, economy and symbolic beliefs.

Outline of thesis chapters

The thesis will be organised in the following manner. *Chapter 1* (this chapter) introduces the thesis, briefly discussing the present state of knowledge, outlining the problems and potential for research, before describing the aims and objectives of the study. It also

Settlement and society in medieval Ireland (Kilkenny, 1988), pp 3-31.

²³ O’Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 37-178; Fredengren, *Crannogs*, pp 112-281.

²⁴ Clifford Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures* (New York, 1973, London, 1993, reprint), pp 9-10.

outlines the original interpretative and methodological approaches that will be adopted in this thesis.

Chapter 2 will provide a comprehensive historiography of crannogs scholarship.²⁵ It will trace the attempts of scholars to re-create and invent the memory of Irish crannogs from a forgotten cultural tradition. It will also place this scholarship within its social, political and historical context, from the work of the earliest antiquarian practitioners (e.g. the Ordnance Survey, Wood-Martin, Wakeman, Coffey), to the impact of the Harvard Archaeological Mission (in the 1930s to 1950s) and on to the archaeological surveys and excavations of the modern era (e.g. Rathinaun, Moynagh Lough, Lough Gara, the Archaeological Survey of Ireland). In brief, it will explain how scholarship has proceeded to the current state of knowledge, thereby setting the stage for new interpretative and theoretical perspectives.

Chapter 3 will describe the theoretical and methodological approaches to be adopted in this study. It will argue that multidisciplinary perspectives (using early medieval saints' lives, annals, laws and sagas, as well as archaeology and palaeoecology), although challenging and bringing their own interpretative problems, are now required to provide different and original insights into the social and ideological role of crannogs in early medieval Ireland. It also provides a brief discussion of previous rationales behind multidisciplinary approaches. It will argue that a more critical approach to both texts and objects reveals that both were used as *means of communication in the past* to construct, resist and re-invent social structures in the early Middle Ages. Recognising this dynamic should allow modern scholars to break through to a more exciting multidisciplinary. It will outline the methodological and theoretical approaches to settlement and landscape in early medieval Ireland. It will also argue that traditional landscape archaeological approaches (using maps, documents, aerial photography, archaeological surveys of regions and localities) can now be combined with sociology, anthropology and postprocessual archaeological theory to enable new insights into the perception, understanding and use of islands and crannogs in the social, cultural, economic and ideological landscapes of early medieval Ireland.

²⁵ The bibliography compiled for the historiography in Chapter 2 includes most books and articles published on Irish crannogs, from c. 1830s until 2003. It will also be based on original research in archaeological survey and museum archives, as well as studies of previously unpublished site excavations and surveys. It will consider the social and political context and practice of Irish archaeology across time, from its antiquarian origins to its present professional context.

Chapter 4 explores the perception and role of islands in the early medieval imagination. This is because it will be argued in this study that early medieval crannogs were built islets of stone, earth and timber, intended to provide people with a defined, water-bounded piece of land separated from the shore. They were, in both reality and effect, *islands*. Significantly, early medieval writers did not distinguish between different types of island; artificial, natural or fantastic. For instance, they used the Irish words *oilean* and *inis* interchangeably in the early medieval saints' lives, annals and narrative literature to refer to *both* natural islands and crannogs. The distinctive and well-known word used to describe them today, crannog (*crannoc*) is never used in the early Middle Ages. In fact, the word crannog was not first used in the annals until the mid-thirteenth century, after the Anglo-Norman invasion.²⁶ Thence, early Irish texts reveal what people were doing when they built and occupied crannogs - they were *making and inhabiting islands*. It is vital then to explore how people imagined, experienced and understood islands in early medieval Ireland and how they might have used islands to create, negotiate and maintain social and ideological relationships.

The chapter will provide the first attempt to reconstruct the role and perception of islands in the early medieval imagination. It will be inspired by descriptions, motifs and incidents in the early medieval saint's lives (generally dated to the seventh to twelfth centuries AD), the voyage tales, adventure tales and sagas (typically eighth to tenth centuries AD) as well as annalistic references (typically from the seventh to the twelfth century AD) to battles, murders and deaths on crannogs. It will explore how early medieval society understood islands as distant and isolated places, bounded by water, to which access could be controlled. It will also reveal that islands were often seen as places of symbolic and ideological potential, being liminal places close to the supernatural otherworld, where fantastic monsters, otherworldly people, women, experiences and phenomena could be expected. These beliefs and projections can also be revealing about early medieval *mentalités*, social structures, symbolic and cultural values and people's ideas about landscape, boundaries and social norms. The chapter will then move on to explore how islands could have been used in the performance and structuring of social identities (i.e. in terms of ethnicity, social hierarchy, status and role, gender, age and

²⁶ The earliest annalistic use of the word 'crannog' is in the *Annals of the Four Masters* for AD 1247 (*A.F.M.* 1247.6), when 'Miles Mac Costello took possession of Feadha Conmaicne, and expelled Cathal Mac Rannal from thence; the crannog of Claelough was also taken for him (*crannoc clainlocha do gabail*), and he left those who had taken it to guard it for him'. It is interesting then that the word 'crannog' only comes into use in the late medieval period, *after* the Anglo-Norman invasion, perhaps suggesting that they only become 'strange' when both the Anglo-Normans and Gaelic Irish realised that they were culturally distinctive.

kinship) within the community. Paradoxically, at the same time as they were places 'at the edge', it will also be revealed that islands were often socially and culturally significant *centres*. Islands could variously be the residences of powerful elites (e.g. saints, kings), distinctive social groups (e.g. clerics, hermits, and women) as well as the socially marginalised (male youths, landless wanderers, the poor). It is hoped that this discussion of social identity in the early Middle Ages will itself be a useful contribution, but it is mostly intended that this chapter will enable new interpretative perspectives to be brought to the landscapes, architecture and insularity of early medieval crannogs in Ireland.

Chapter 5 will explore the potential social, economic and ideological role of crannogs within the early medieval landscape. This chapter, the first of two original empirical studies, will be based on regional and local analyses of crannogs in Westmeath, in the Irish north midlands (the location of the early medieval over-kingdom of Mide). This landscape study, the first to draw together the evidence from sites within the county, will be based on this author's own archaeological surveys, particularly those on Lough Derravarragh.²⁷ It will also be based on research on early medieval artefacts previously found within Co. Westmeath.²⁸ The chapter also synthesises for the first time, previously unpublished site surveys conducted by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland in the early 1980s around Westmeath, as well as the work of the Crannog Archaeological Project in the 1990s.²⁹ The chapter will first describe the physical, environmental and vegetational history of Westmeath, a region famous for its lakelands. It will then provide a political and historical narrative of the population groups of the region, between the fifth and the twelfth centuries AD. This will trace how some of the region's peoples (the Clann Chólmáin dynasty of the southern Uí Néill in particular) achieved regional and island-wide political power, while others (e.g. the Fir Tulach, the Cenél Fiachach, the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair) were also involved in political and dynastic struggles within the overkingdom of Mide. Significantly, it will be shown that there is both archaeological and historical evidence that crannogs were often key places for these and other peoples. The chapter will then describe the archaeological evidence for early medieval settlement in Westmeath, providing the backdrop for a range of

²⁷ Appendix 2: Catalogue of crannogs in Westmeath.

²⁸ N.M.I. Top. Files. = National Museum of Ireland Topographical files: currently archived in Dept. of Antiquities, N.M.I., Kildare St., Dublin

²⁹ A.S.I. Files, Westmeath RMP = Archaeological Survey of Ireland: Register of Monuments and Places for Co. Westmeath, currently archived in the National Monuments Service, Dúchas – the Heritage Service, 51 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2. Most of the Crannog Archaeological Project's work is unpublished and was never entered into the A.S.I. files. Therefore, this author conducted his own archaeological survey of the Lough Ennell crannogs.

landscape studies of its crannogs. The chapter will explore the physical location and potential role of crannogs in relation to regional and local topographies, geology, soils, lakes, rivers and drainage. They will also be explored in relation to other early medieval settlements (ringforts, churches, and holy wells) as well as to early medieval political and territorial boundaries, to explore their potential diverse social, economic and ideological roles. A series of local case studies or 'scenarios' will then sketch out how particular crannogs may have been used in terms of social identity (especially in terms of political power, royal performance, lordship, territorial defence, and as dwellings for lower social classes, such as the poor and labourers). In conclusion, Westmeath crannogs will also be explored in terms of agriculture, economy, movement and travel, all significant aspects of people's lives, routines and experiences during the period.

Chapter 6 will then explore how crannogs were built, altered and inhabited as *islands* throughout the early medieval period. It will again be a largely empirical study, based on this author's original research and archaeological surveys of crannogs in Westmeath (particularly around Lough Derravarragh and Lough Ennell). However, it will also utilise the results of other published, and often overlooked, county and regional crannog surveys (e.g. in Down, Fermanagh, Cavan, Monaghan, north and west Galway and south Mayo). It will discuss how early medieval communities may have used the physical *architecture* of crannogs, their cairns, palisades, causeways, to manage and control various social encounters. It will begin by discussing early medieval crannogs in terms of chronology, time and social memory, exploring how they were often seen as symbols of the past, how they were used, altered and changed across time and the social and cultural values involved in their ultimate site abandonment. This will be based on a synthesis of previously unpublished radiocarbon dates, dendrochronological dates and artefactual evidence in both Ireland and Westmeath. Inspired by the study's prior analysis of how islands were perceived by early medieval communities (e.g. in terms of insularity, island boundaries, distant views, and movement across water), it will then attempt to show how people may have understood and used their *visible* physical or architectural differences in terms of crannog size, location, form and appearance.

Chapter 7 will then explore the social and ideological organisation of space *within* early medieval crannogs, showing how such places shaped people's sense of themselves and the communities they lived in, and how these island dwelling places were themselves created by daily life, labour, practices and habitual activities. It will be argued that early medieval crannogs can usefully be seen as intensely bounded spaces, within which different social encounters, identities and roles were played out. Using archaeology, early

Irish history, anthropology and ethnological studies, it will aim for a detailed consideration of such *internal* physical features as palisades, entrances, working areas, houses and rubbish heaps or middens. This chapter will be based on a re-interpretation of some classic Irish early medieval crannogs (moving back out from Westmeath to sites around the midlands and north). Although some of these previously excavated crannogs are often considered as difficult and intractable sites to interpret, it will be shown here that a close and careful reading of the original published site plans, cross-sections and finds' reports enables new insights into life on islands in the early medieval period.

Chapter 8 will conclude the thesis, summarising the results of the study and will offer comments on the potential for future research. In volume 2, the thesis' appendices will include a select bibliography of historical references to crannogs, islands and lakes (Appendix 1), a catalogue of crannogs in Westmeath (Appendix 2) and a gazetteer of both published and unpublished crannog excavations. It will also include the abbreviations and bibliography of references used in this PhD thesis.

Chapter 2

Islands and the scholarly imagination:

A historiography of crannog studies

Introduction

By the beginnings of the nineteenth century, crannogs that had been occupied periodically since the Middle Ages had been long abandoned and forgotten. The concept of building and living on an artificial island had largely passed out of the Irish collective memory. Through the nineteenth century, this memory was re-invented through the scholarly use of early historical texts and the archaeological investigation of crannogs. It was a work of memory building, a collective gathering of traces of the past preserved in texts and objects. Interestingly, it was also a work of the imagination, as could be argued that the Irish crannog, as currently understood by both academics and the general public, is an invention born of scholarly research and creativity. It has literally been imagined and created by scholars of the modern age.

In fact, behind all our recent interpretations of Irish crannogs, there lies almost two hundred years of antiquarian and archaeological speculation. Indeed, a postmodernist literary critic might suggest that all these discourses are essentially an endless re-writing and re-creation of an established scholarly canon.¹ In other words, when the history of past approaches to crannogs is reviewed, a distinct sense emerges of the ways that Irish archaeologists have unconsciously worked within an orthodoxy of crannog scholarship. Now, this does not mean that the validity of previous work should be dismissed. A recent writer on Scottish crannogs asserted that all the years of antiquarian and early twentieth century work was more or less useless. In his opinion, the only way forward was for modern archaeologists to do proper surveys and excavations, amassing new, original empirical data, and then and only then, offer interpretations.² This is a wrong-headed approach for two main reasons. Firstly, it is indeed possible to use the results of past

¹ I certainly got a disconcerting sense of this a few years ago, when I re-read my own ancient, battered copy of William Wood-Martin's *The lake dwellings of Ireland*, published in 1886 (a copy, I suspect, that was owned and annotated by another crannog scholar, George Kinahan). It was a chastening experience. I could see how in the past, I have certainly offered as original insights, interpretations of the history and uses of crannogs that were originally proposed by him. But I am not the only one - revealing that while Wood-Martin is frequently *cited*, he seems to be rarely actually *read*, by Irish archaeologists.

investigations of Irish crannogs, albeit carefully. Secondly, it is also true that a constant exploration of, and engagement with, the intellectual, cultural and political origins of our past ideas about crannogs enables the construction of new and interesting ones about the perception and use of crannogs in early medieval Ireland.

This historiography of Irish crannog studies,³ like others on the history of Irish archaeology, draws attention to the influence of contemporary cultural and political movements, such as the development of antiquarianism through the nineteenth century, the Celtic Revival of the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century, and the competing nationalisms of the Irish Free State and Northern Ireland in the 1930s and 1940s.⁴ Another important theme will be the inherent tensions in the production of knowledge between local communities, antiquities collectors and academic scholars. The 'crannog idea' (with its classic image of an isolated, palisaded island) was developed by antiquarians, and other potentially useful explanations of artificial islands may have been subsumed or ignored (recent studies of folklore reveal different, hidden memories of island life). In particular, some opinions (typically those of antiquarians, archaeologists and academics) have been promoted, while others (e.g. local farmers and labourers, or modern treasure hunters, etc) have been ignored or forgotten. In a sense, crannogs have played a key role in the specialisation and professionalisation of archaeology as a pursuit in Ireland.

It is also worth reflecting on the ways that scholars work between the disciplines of archaeology, history and folklore (between object, word and voice), and the tendency that there has been to give historical texts the pre-eminent position. It is clear that from quite an early stage, Irish antiquaries and archaeologists have attached an unusual importance to historical texts in their interpretations of Irish crannogs. Originally, this

² M.W. Holley, *The artificial islets/crannogs of the central Inner Hebrides* (Oxford, 2000), pp 1-4.

³ Recent historiographical reviews of Irish crannog studies include Bryony Coles and John Coles, *People of the wetlands: Bogs, bodes and lake-dwellers* (London, 1989), pp 9-51; John Coles, 'Irish wetland archaeology: From opprobrium to opportunity', in Barry Raftery and Joyce Hickey (eds.), *Recent developments in wetland research* (Dublin, 2001), pp 1-12; O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp. 7-35; C.S. Briggs, 'A historiography of the Irish crannog: The discovery of Lagore as prologue to Wood-Martin's *Lake Dwellings of Ireland* of 1886' in *Antiquaries Journal*, 79 (1999), pp 347-377; Fredengren *Crannogs*, pp 28-62.

⁴ Most recent discussions of the development of Irish archaeology have focused on the role of nationalism, see Elizabeth Crooke, *Politics, archaeology and the creation of a National Museum of Ireland* (Dublin and Portland 2000); Gabriel Cooney, 'Theory and practice in Irish archaeology' in P.J. Ucko (ed.), *Theory in archaeology* (London, 1995), pp 263-77; Jerry O'Sullivan, 'Nationalists, archaeologists and the myth of the Golden Age' in M.A. Monk and J. Sheehan (eds.), *Early medieval Munster: archaeology, history and society*, (Cork, 1998), pp 178-89; Michael Tierney, 'Theory and politics in early medieval Irish archaeology' in Monk and Sheehan (eds.), *Early medieval Munster*, pp 190-9.

may well have been due to the extraordinary vigour of historical studies in the mid nineteenth century, when early Irish annals, law texts and legends were all being edited and published by Celtic scholars. This led scholars like O'Donovan, Wilde, Petrie and others to believe that history could be used to identify monuments and explain the functions of both objects and sites. In contrast, contemporary antiquaries in Denmark were often working in a text-free environment, perhaps explaining the more sophisticated approaches to chronology and classification.⁵

From peasant folklore to antiquarian respectability, 1750-1857

A forgotten tradition – before 'crannogs', 1750-1810

In the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century, Irish society was experiencing profound change, partly due to the social and economic uncertainty brought about by the French wars and the intellectual insecurity of both Irish and continental revolutions. A rapidly rising peasant population in the countryside led local communities to seek an income wherever they could find it. The decline in traditional religious beliefs meant that one source of income was the hidden treasures that could be recovered from places previously considered out-of-bounds.⁶ Ancient ringforts were dug into, abandoned church sites quarried and cairns were taken apart in search of gold and silver treasure. These objects were then sold on to travelling rag-and-bone men, tinkers and jewellers for cash. Indeed, this nascent antiquities trade was to lead to some goldsmiths and silversmiths adding 'antiquities collector' to their job-descriptions. While the poor were discovering this source of income, the educated elite was also developing an interest in antiquities, for reasons of personal gain or for scholarship.

Interestingly, while it is evident that large-scale drainage operations were exposing stone and wooden structures in lake sediments, there seems not to have been any concept of the *crannog* as an ancient residence. We might take this to suggest that by the late eighteenth century, crannogs were a forgotten tradition. This is odd. In the sixteenth century, crannogs were used as royal lodges, military strongholds, prisons, hospitals, ammunition stores, and places to hoard gold and silver plate. In the wars of the seventeenth century, they were occasionally used as fortified rebel bases and as locations to make bullets, rest and recuperate. There are also hints that they served as dwellings of the poor and as hideouts for vagabonds, freebooters, robbers and other 'malcontents' in the eighteenth century. It is also true that crannogs were used for more prosaic tasks in

⁵ John Waddell, *The prehistoric archaeology of Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), p. 2.

⁶ G.M. Smith, 'Spoliation of the past: The destruction of monuments and treasure-hunting in

the late eighteenth century, as 'kale gardens' (places isolated from browsing animals that could be used for growing vegetables) or as fishing and fowling places. But, by the late eighteenth century, this tradition seems to have been fading out, with the islands abandoned. It seems that any collective memory of the past use of crannogs had vanished.

Moreover, while ideas about the supernatural origins of 'fairy forts' provided some level of superstitious protection for ringforts, artificial islands appear to have been merely seen by local people as a source of bog timber, stone, organic-rich soil and bone for manuring land. This suggests that such communities had actually *forgotten* about the existence of such artificially constructed crannogs. There are various potential explanations for why this happened. Lacking the distinctive surface appearance of a ringfort or church, crannogs may have simply been seen as natural, unremarkable islets rather than ancient places. More interestingly, it is possible that people in actively switching their allegiance to the new English and Scots Planter political and social order of the seventeenth century, were deliberately disregarding the remnants (i.e. crannogs) of the displaced Gaelic lordships. Alternatively, in the newly commercialised society and economy of the eighteenth century, places (i.e. crannogs) previously associated with feudal ties and obligations were simply incomprehensible and ultimately forgettable.

Or perhaps, they were remembered but not openly discussed in front of the gentry. It is difficult to pick up threads of local people's ideas about crannogs in nineteenth century folklore, much of which is bowdlerised and sentimentalised in contemporary books. It certainly seems barely credible that local people were unaware of, or didn't have opinions about, the historicity of such places in their landscape. Writing much later, William Wilde described how quite distinctive ideas about 'drowned islands' existed amongst local communities. In the summer of 1860, he transcribed an account of local folklore about supernatural incidents on a crannog at Donore, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. (Fig. 2.1).

In the beautiful lake of Derravarra, County Westmeath, so well-known to all followers of the green-drake, and so much frequented every June, there are remains of a crannoge about three or four feet under summer-water near what is called the Port – on the Donore shore. The stones of this crannoge, evidently arranged by the hand of man, are placed in a circle, and the place itself is called "The Castle". Once up a time – as the legend goes, and as Jack Nally, or any of the boatmen so admirably portrayed by Erskine Nicol, will relate – a fisherman and his son went out to spear eels; when a terrible storm arose, and the waves threatened to leap into

nineteenth-century Ireland' in *Peritia*, 13 (1999), pp 154-72.

the boat. "Strike", says the father, who managed the oars, "strike your spear, my son, into the ninth wave that rises upon us or we are lost". With unerring aim, the son plunged his sharp trident into the rising billow, "when, in the turn of your eye, it was whipped out of his hand; but the storm ceased, the waves subsided, and the men returned to their cottage beside the shore. Not long after, while drying themselves by the fire, a strange man came in, and beckoned the son to follow him. "They entered the boat and passed over to the castle, where the usual scenery, paraphernalia and phraseology common to Irish fairy-lore commences in the narration, but which, having been so frequently described by myself and others, it is unnecessary to detail. The young man was finally led into the presence of a lady, which it appears was mistress of the waves and from whose hands he alone could extract the spear.⁷



Fig. 2.1 View across northwest shore of Donore townland, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. A local folktale recorded by William Wilde in 1860 described how a crannog on this shore known as 'The Castle' (probably Castlewatty) was the venue for a fantastic encounter between two fishermen and a woman of the underworld. By the 1930s, Lough Derravarragh's crannogs had been forgotten locally and there is little mention of them in the Folklore Commissions School's Manuscripts (CUCAP AHH 43).

⁷ W. R. Wilde, 'Irish crannogs and Swiss Pfahlbanten' in *The Athenaeum*, no. 1729 (15th December, 1860), pp 831-2; The crannog described in this tale is probably that one depicted as "Castlewatty" on the second edition Ordnance Survey maps situated off Donore twd, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. The tale itself is remarkably similar to many of the early medieval Irish *echtrae*, which describe the hero's descent to the underworld through an island in a lake. He also describes a 'sunken island' at Kylemore Lough, Co. Galway, again a site normally submerged even during the summer. This island was reputed to rise every night, but if "anyone was to land on it with fire and salt, it never could go down again". Wilde recommended that it would be 'interesting to collect the legends relating to Crannoges, both in this country and in Scotland'.

On the other hand, Wood-Martin was later to be of the rather narrow-minded opinion that without scholarly recognition of such places, local people with their simple ideas did not have a frame of reference to understand the human origins of these islands.

The sites of many lacustrine settlements, or villages built in the water, called in Irish crannogs, are often designated by the peasantry "drowned islands", for bawtha, signifying "drowned" is applied, by the country people to places or objects submerged in water....If till lately people, otherwise well informed, were totally ignorant on the subject of these "drowned" dwellings, it is the less surprising that the simple Irish fisherman, gliding in his skiff over the placid surface of the waters, and peering into their clear depths, should have failed to recognize that the mouldering piles projecting from the oozy bottom were traces of the love of security of his predecessors in the country; and that in the mud of the ever-accumulating lacustrine deposit are preserved material evidences of a state of primitive society long since passed away.⁸

The first antiquarian recognition of islands and houses in lakes, 1810-1839

Nevertheless, an awareness of the existence of artificial islands in lakes was emerging amongst the educated elite, as can be seen in many early topographical accounts. As early as 1784, the lowering of water in Lough Deehan, Kilmacduagh, Co. Galway led to the discovery of 'a house in mud at the bottom, formed of oak timber of great thickness, the sides and roof of which were formed of wattle-work of the same substance; it appeared as if intended to float, and the timber of which it was constructed was perfectly sound'. Samuel Lewis first published this account in 1837, in his *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, probably based on information obtained from local informants.⁹

Edward Wakefield, writing in 1812 provides the earliest contemporary account. After the drainage in 1810 of Lough Nahinch, at Ballynahinch, near Roscrea, Co. Tipperary, a Mr Trench observed a large circular plank-built structure that resembled 'the top of an immense tub, about sixty feet (18.29m) in diameter'. Although it was not recognised as a crannog at the time, this almost certainly was the timber palisade of a stone-built crannog with palisade and causeway that survives today, recently dendrochronologically dated to AD 1026-1061.¹⁰ Similarly, there are references in 1809 to the discovery of a

⁸ W.G. Wood-Martin, *Traces of the elder faiths of Ireland: a folklore sketch: A hand-book of Irish pre-Christian traditions* (London, 1902), p. 220.

⁹ S.A. Lewis, *A topographical dictionary of Ireland* (London 1837), vol. II, p.163 ; J.H. Andrews, 'Lewis's Topographical dictionary' in Brian Lalor (ed.) *The encyclopedia of Ireland* (Dublin, 2003), p. 627.

¹⁰ E. Wakefield, *An account of Ireland*, (London, 1812); H.B. Trench and G.H. Kinahan, 'Notes on a

log-boat with four paddles on a 'stratum of burnt oak' (waterlogged oak when exposed to air turns black) at Ardrin, Co. Down, but little sense of any recognition of an artificial island.¹¹

The idea of *houses in lakes* seems to have been strengthening by the 1830s. Occasionally both local labourers and landlords recognised these sites as habitations of some type. For example, in his manuscript journal for 1833, Roger Chambers Walker described how he had heard about 'a curious description of the remains of an ancient house discovered the year before in draining a small lake...' near Freshford, Co. Roscommon.¹²

It is also evident that the surveyors working for the Ordnance Survey were becoming aware of the idea of 'artificial islands.' In the Memoirs of the Ordnance Survey for County Londonderry, compiled about 1836, there are several descriptions of *artificial islands in lakes*.¹³ At Ballygruby, they refer to an 'artificial island' on Lough Lug, 'of earth and gravel and stones, raised on a frame of timber', 38 yards (34.75m) in diameter with a substantial stone causeway leading from the island to an 'unfinished fort'. At Ballymacombs Beg, there is a reference to 'those artificial islands found in bogs and lakes' and a brief description of 'a wooden frame, morticed into upright stakes'. At Calmore, there was the 'ruins of an artificial island, composed of large logs and planks bound together by mortices and wooden pins...enclosed by long poles standing upright', with finds including wooden barrels, bowls and other items.

There are similar accounts of islands in Loughnagolagh and at Shillin Lough (Loughinshollin). C.W. Ligar's description of an artificial island at Ballymacpeake (in Maghera, east Co. Londonderry), prepared about 1836, gives a good sense of how Ordnance Survey officers viewed these sites (and also reveals that there was a local tradition of treasure in them at about 1796) (Fig. 2.2).

crannoge in Lough Nahinch' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 9C, (1864-66), pp 176-9; M.P. Cahalan and A.M.G. Hyland 'Lough Nahinch crannog in Lower Ormond' in *Tipperary Historical Journal*, no vol. number (1988), pp 15-21; Jean Farrelly and Caimin O'Brien, *Archaeological Inventory of County Tipperary: Vol. I - North Tipperary* (Dublin, 2002), p. 53.

¹¹ Coles and Coles, *People of the wetlands*, p. 13.

¹² Niamh Whitfield, 'A filigree panel and a coin from an Irish crannog at Alnwick Castle, with an appendix on the discovery of crannogs at Strokestown, Co. Roscommon' in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 10 (2001), pp 49-71; W.G. Wood-Martin, *Pagan Ireland: An archaeological sketch: A handbook of Irish pre-Christian antiquities* (London, 1895), p. 658.



North view of the artificial Island and Old Fort.

Fig. 2.2 One of the earliest depictions of an Irish crannog, in a drawing of an 'artificial island and old fort' at Ballymacpeake, Co. Londonderry in 1836. (Source: Royal Irish Academy Ordnance Survey Memoirs, Parish of Maghera; C.S. Briggs, 'A historiography of the Irish crannog', p. 350).

'Old Island and fort

There is in the townland of Ballymacpeak a small lake containing the remains of what was once a well-constructed artificial island, but was nearly destroyed about 40 years since by a person who had an idea that treasures were concealed in it. From the ruins now to be seen the island appears to have been about 20 or 30 feet in diameter. It was formed by upright oak stakes driven into the ground and mortised into a series of horizontal ones, which formed a floor or platform on which was laid earth mixed with bog. This is the account given of it by persons who live in the vicinity and who remember when it stood undisturbed, and who say that there was formerly a narrow footway leading from the island to the shore of the lake opposite to the old fort situated on its borders. The footpath was formed of stakes similar to the island. The waters of the lake have been drained and vegetation is rapidly encroaching into it, and to all appearance will soon replace the water with a kind of soft bog. A few of the stakes which formed the island still remain standing.¹⁴

Other scholars were also noting island fortresses. Samuel Lewis' previously mentioned *Topographical Dictionary of Ireland*, published in 1837, refers to various houses in lakes, including the following construction in Lough Annagh, Co. Offaly.

¹³ Briggs, 'A historiography of the Irish crannog', pp 368-71.

¹⁴ Angélique Day and Patrick McWilliams, *Ordnance Survey Memoirs of Ireland vol. eighteen: Parishes of County Londonderry V, 1830, 1833, 1836-7: Maghera and Tamlaght O'Crilly* (Belfast, 1993), pp 10-11.

'in the middle of this lake, where it is most shallow, certain oak framing is yet visible and there is a traditional report that in the war of 1641 a party of insurgents had a wooden house erected on this platform, whence they went out at night in a boat and plundered the surrounding country'.¹⁵

This local folklore was to be subsequently confirmed in 1868, when seventeenth-century armour, an iron halberd, iron swords, a matchlock and a gun-barrel of small calibre were some of the finds made on 'an island-like patch rising a little above the water level, of piles', with broken querns, burnt brick and stone in the vicinity.¹⁶

Collecting objects from the 'bone-heap' of Lagore, 1839-48

The discovery of Lagore crannog is commonly taken to represent the beginnings of crannog scholarship in Ireland. In reality, the earliest work at Lagore by Irish antiquarians largely involved merely the recovery of antiquities and most subsequent negotiations relate to the collecting, dispersal and sale of these objects in Ireland, Britain and Denmark. William Wilde's first publication of it refers to merely a 'bone-heap'. There is virtually no contemporary account of the site's appearance and no effort was made to record location, structure or stratigraphical evidence.¹⁷

It is also now clear that the site was discovered first by local labourers, then recognised as significant by a rag-and-bone man, and only latterly did Irish antiquarians become involved. In fact, the early accounts illustrate as clearly the occasionally strained relationships between the antiquarians, collectors and landowners involved.¹⁸ Historians

¹⁵ Lewis, *A topographical dictionary*, vol. II, p. 175.

¹⁶ General Dunne, 'Notices of a cranog in Lough Annagh, King's County' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 10 (1868-1869), pp 154-7; T. Stanley, 'Notice of the cranoge in Lough Annagh' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 1 (1868-9), pp 156-7; W.G. Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland or ancient lacustrine habitations of Erin commonly called crannogs* (Dublin, 1886), pp 209-11.

¹⁷ Lagore crannog, Co. Meath is amongst the most significant and influential early medieval archaeological sites investigated in Ireland. Its most intensive phase of occupation dates to between the seventh and the tenth centuries AD, when it served as the 'royal' residence of the early medieval kings of southern Brega. The earliest antiquarian descriptions of the site include W.R. Wilde, 'Animal remains and antiquities found at Dunshaughlin' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 1c (1836-41), pp 420-6; J. Talbot (de Malahide), 'Memoir on some ancient arms and implements found at Lagore, near Dunshaughlin, County of Meath; with a few remarks on the classification of northern antiquities' in *Arch. Jn.* 6 (1849), pp 101-9; Wood-Martin, *Lake dwellings*, pp 23-5; The site was subsequently excavated by the Harvard Archaeological Mission; Hugh O'Neill Hencken, 'Lagore crannóg: an Irish royal residence of the seventh to tenth century A.D' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 53c (1950), pp 1-248; for a recent summary, see George Eogan, 'Life and living at Lagore' in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), pp 64-82.

¹⁸ Briggs, 'a historiography of the Irish crannog' provides the most recent analysis of the various antiquarians involved in the Lagore discovery; see also Siobhan De hÓir, 'A letter from W.F. Wakeman to James Graves in 1882' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 120 (1990), pp 112-9.

familiar with the *Annals of Ulster*, with its frequent references to Loch Gabor would have known of the existence of a place called Lagore that was an early medieval royal site. Significantly, the site was also apparently represented as a tumulus on a map of Meath dated to 1659, so the topographical feature must have been the subject of some local folklore.¹⁹ However, there is little sense that anybody had made a connection between historical accounts and this particular place.

In the late 1830s, local men began either turf-cutting or drain-digging beside, or on, a tumulus on the edge of a bog (a dried out lake east of the town of Dunshaughlin).²⁰ They uncovered huge amounts of animal bones and about one hundred and fifty cartloads of bones had apparently been removed and exported to Scotland for fertiliser by the time it came to the notice of collectors. Apparently, the diggers were initially uninterested in the metal and other objects exposed by the work, most of which they simply threw aside. Later on, as they became more experienced in artefact identification, and aware of the potential financial rewards, they collected these objects and sold them to rag-and-bone men or gave them to the local landlord's (a Mr Barnewall) steward.

The first and most influential collector to visit the site was a James Henry Underwood, a rag-and-bone man, who collected the antiquities and sold them to the Topographical section of the Ordnance Survey of Ireland, the Royal Irish Academy, as well as to wealthy collectors such as Dean Dawson, Lord Talbot de Malahide and George Petrie. Petrie was intrigued and visited the site in the company of William Wilde and found, thrown on the floor of a barn at Lagore House, a large collection of antiquities including iron swords, daggers, spears, axes, saws, chains, shears, pins and brooches of bronze and bone and wooden objects. In the absence of his master, the local steward was unwilling to part with any of the items and by the time Petrie returned, the collection had been widely scattered, although a few made their way into the collection of the Royal Irish Academy.

The academy appears to have requested George Petrie and William Wilde (then a young man of 24 years) to record the site and publish their findings, but although Wilde published papers on the animal bones, an overall account never appeared. Both

¹⁹ Briggs, 'A historiography of the Irish crannog', p. 351.

²⁰ Another account of the first discovery is contained in a letter from Dean R. Butler of Trim to Dean Dawson (a well-known antiquities collector), where a description is given of 'a small tumulus on the edge of a bog...an enclosure of piles of wood, within which lay a human skeleton...animal bones in layers - with earth between them -', as well as brass, iron and bone artefacts; see G.F. Mitchell, 'Voices from the past; three antiquarian letters' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 113 (1983), pp 47-52.

Wakeman and MacAlister were later to imply that some quarrel or (in Wakeman's words) 'the mutual jealousies of Petrie and Wilde' prevented a more detailed publication.²¹ Indeed, it seems that James Talbot's irritation at the lack of a complete, methodical publication of the site directly led him to publish his own notes.²² Wilde's publications of his visit to the site (in the first volume of the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*), describe the site, its environs and some of the exposed structures. He saw the crannog as consisting of a circular mound 520 feet in diameter, slightly raised above the surrounding bog or marsh, with upright posts defining the circumference.²³

The second main phase of activity at Lagore came several years later. Between 1846 and 1849, cleaning of the small river beside the site and turf cutting on it led to the discovery of more amounts of bone, wooden palisades and wooden hut structures. The latter were described in the later (in 1882) reminiscences of William Wakeman who visited the site almost daily over a month in the summer of 1848.²⁴ He saw an apparent rectangular wooden sub-structure or house built of sill-beams, grooved uprights and plank cladding caulked with moss and gathered a range of finds from the site himself. In his later publication of the Lagore excavations, Hugh O'Neill Hencken reckoned that Wakeman's account of the rectangular structures was a mistaken description of part of the palisade.²⁵ However, despite the brief descriptions of the site as exposed, it is interesting that the dominant picture that emerges from the antiquarian activity at Lagore is of the anxiety to secure a collection of antiquities, rather than a scientific excavation or a systematic evaluation of the site. It was not to be until later years, with the work of such scholars as George Kinahan, Morant, Robert Munro, William Wakeman that this perspective was to emerge.²⁶

Other artificial islands were noted around the same time, many associated with military campaigns of the sixteenth and seventeenth century. About the year 1839, the lowering of the water levels at Roughan Lake, near Dungannon, Co. Tyrone, meant that 'an island artificially formed was exposed to view'. The island produced large amounts of

²¹ De hÓir, 'A letter from W.F. Wakeman', p.112; R.A.S. Macalister, *The archaeology of Ireland* (London, 1928), p. 301.

²² Talbot (de Malahide), 'Memoir on some ancient arms'.

²³ Wilde, 'Animal remains and antiquities found at Dunshaughlin', pp 420-6

²⁴ W.F. Wakeman, 'On certain recent discoveries of ancient crannog structures, chiefly in the County of Fermanagh' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 15 (1879-1882b), pp 324-39, at p. 325; Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings of Ireland*, p. 24; De hÓir, 'A letter from W.F. Wakeman', pp 112-116.

²⁵ Hencken, 'Lagore crannóg', p. 46.

²⁶ Briggs, 'A historiography of the Irish crannog', p.368 draws attention, for example, to the fact that all the key figures (e.g. Petrie, Wilde, even Wakeman, were involved themselves in the sale and dispersal of the Lagore antiquities to England, and even to Denmark, through the offices of Worsaae.

pottery, bones, a bronze pin, a few bronze spearheads and a decorated upper-stone of a rotary quern.²⁷ This may have been the Gaelic Irish crannog captured by the English general, Lord Mountjoy, on July 1st 1602, on Lough Roughan, near Dungannon, Co. Tyrone. Richard Bartlett's well-known cartographic depiction of an attack on a Ulster crannog may actually be a representation of this incident.²⁸ Intriguingly, there are also later historical references to one *Raghan Isle* being the last retreat of Sir Phelim O'Neill in 1641, the island holding out against English forces until boats were brought to the lake in 1653 by William Lord Charlemont to aid in the attack.²⁹ About the same time (1839), a stone-built island was discovered at Lough Gur, Co. Limerick. Locals knew the site and had gathered antiquities from it, again with large amounts of bone being seen, but no palisade was recognised. This crannog had been attacked by English forces in 1599.³⁰

In 1844, the draining of the extensive Ballinderry Lough, near Moate, Co. Westmeath revealed the remains of one large crannog (later to be known as Ballinderry crannog No. 2). The site was dug into by locals, producing vast quantities of bones and a range of antiquities, including two dugout boats.³¹ One Mr. Hayes who sent William Wilde a description of the site along with a plan and a map of its location initially recorded the site. It is also evident from the files of the National Museum that a wide range of archaeological objects was being recovered from the bogs in the environs of the site. The Harvard Archaeological Mission subsequently excavated Ballinderry crannog No. 1, Co. Westmeath, and Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Offaly, in the 1930s.³²

The Commission for Arterial Drainage and Inland Navigation and the 'Strokestown crannogs', Co. Roscommon, 1843-1852

By the early nineteenth century, land drainage schemes, carried out locally by improving landlords, were exposing increasing numbers of archaeological sites. About 1843, the Board of Works began a more ambitious programme of drainage works. The Board of Works' officers anticipated that *'the arterial drainage works would afford opportunities rarely possessed for obtaining antique remains from places under water, which remains,*

²⁷ Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, p. 88.

²⁸ G.A. Hayes-McCoy, *Ulster and other Irish Maps, c. 1600* (Dublin, 1964).

²⁹ Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, p. 88, p. 148.

³⁰ Wood-Martin, *Lake dwellings*, p. 25, p. 27

³¹ W.R. Wilde, *A descriptive catalogue of the antiquities of stone, earthen and vegetable materials in the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy* (Dublin 1857), p. 223; J. Graves, 'Stone and bone antiquities, some with oghamic inscriptions, found at a crannóg in Ballinderry Lough' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 16, no. 6, (1883-1884), pp 196-202; J.F.M. French, 'Notes on three bone pins found at the bottom of the Ballinderry lake in the county Westmeath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 32 (1902), pp 153-157.

³² Hugh O'Neill Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannóg no. 1' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 43c (1936), pp 103-239; Hugh O'Neill Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannóg no. 2' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 47c (1942), pp 1-76.

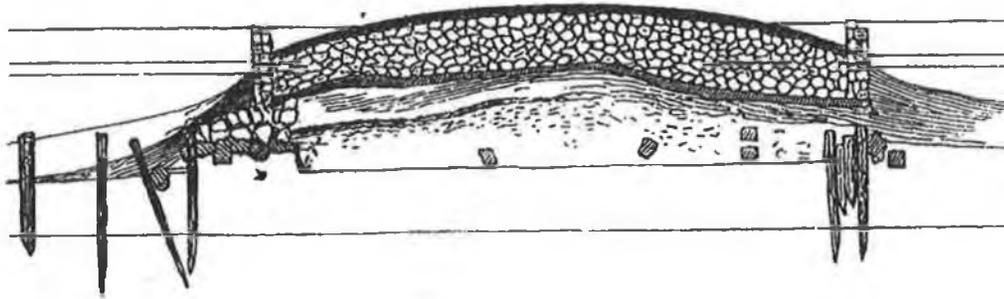


Fig. 2.3 Engineer's cross-section drawing of an early medieval crannog at Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon, illustrating the quality of these early records. (Source: Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland*).

if faithfully described, would be useful adjuncts to our local history'. It is clear that a concerted effort was to be made to record both sites and objects in a coherent fashion.

William Mulvany, M.R.I.A., the member of the Board of Public Works in charge of the department of Arterial Drainage and Inland Navigation, recommended in a circular letter to local engineers that *'in cases where islands of artificial construction, raths, or other works, have been discovered or cut into, descriptive drawings and sections will be of the greatest importance and you are requested to forward them'*.³³ It was also considered important to record the context of individual objects. Mulvany also suggested that

'An object of great importance is to have the antiquities identified with the locality where they were found, and we therefore wish to have attached to each thing found, a card, with a description on one side of the place where found, name of townland, parish, barony, and county ... and on the other side of the card a description of the precise locality, the material in which imbedded, its depth, allusion to other antiquities found with it, and such other matters of interest as occur to you to record'.

In fact, for its time, this was an extraordinarily sophisticated approach to the investigation of archaeological sites. For example, at Ardakillen Lough, Co. Roscommon, a narrow, rectangular box 6 feet in length was hammered into the side of the ditch cutting through a crannog. Carefully removed, it provided a direct sample of the site's stratigraphy. There are probably few archaeological excavations today which retain such quality samples (Fig. 2.3).

³³ W.T. Mulvany, 'Collection of antiquities presented to the Royal Irish Academy' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 5c (1850-1853), Appendix, pp xxxi-xliii.

Between 1843 and 1852, 25 crannogs and 377 objects were discovered by the drainage schemes, mostly in Roscommon and Leitrim, with smaller numbers in Cavan, Monaghan, Limerick, Meath, Westmeath, Down, Offaly and Tyrone. In 1852 after nine years of these works, these antiquities were gathered together and presented to the Museum of the Royal Irish Academy along with a detailed paper written by W.T. Mulvany for its proceedings. Much attention appears to have been focused on the crannogs found on Ardakillen Lough, Fin Lough (Cloonfinlough townland) and Cloonfree Lough, near Strokestown, Co. Roscommon.³⁴ Undoubtedly, they had an added antiquarian interest because, as William Wilde (1815-1876) stated, they were in proximity to the 'royal residences of Connaught, and in the vicinity of Carn Free, the crowning places of its kings, and of Rathcroghan, the Tara of the west'.³⁵ Moreover they were in a region close to Wilde's own heart, as he had spent part of his boyhood there. In some ways, his own subsequent publications on them were to promote their importance.³⁶

The engineer in charge of the Strokestown works, John O'Flaherty itemised (in a letter dated 9 January, published in Mulvany's 1852 paper), the discoveries there. At least 12 artificial islands were exposed by about 1850. Inevitably, there was a similar free-for-all as had happened at Lagore.³⁷ Local people removed tons of bone for manuring, while numerous private collectors and traders in antiquities visited the sites for their own ends. Nevertheless, as the engineers lowered the water levels and cut drainage ditches through the mounds, they prepared site plans and cross-section drawings of the crannogs, depicting in ink the stratigraphic layers of stone, clay and peat. Large numbers of finds were also gathered and were later presented to the museum of the Royal Irish Academy. At Finlough (Cloonfinlough twd), two crannogs were exposed, one was found to have palisades, a radial arrangement of timbers in the foundations, a wooden jetty or a pier, and layers of stone, black earth and animal bone. A human skull and two dugout boats were recovered from the periphery of the site, along with early medieval bronze, iron and stone artefacts, as well as late medieval and post-medieval coins.³⁸

³⁴ For a recent historiography of the discovery and recording of the Strokestown crannogs, see Whitfield, 'A filigree panel and a coin from an Irish crannog', pp 49-72.

³⁵ Wilde, *A catalogue of antiquities*, p. 26.

³⁶ For brief a biography of Wilde, see R.M. Kavanagh, 'Sir William Wilde 1815-1876: His contribution to Irish archaeology' in *Roscommon Hist. Archaeol. Soc. Jn.*, 4 (1992), pp 1-12.

³⁷ While most commentators expressed regret at the pillaging of antiquities, they made little reference to the recent suffering of people in the Strokestown region, Co. Roscommon during the recent famine. The general lack of acknowledgement of those larger events by many antiquarians perhaps reveals much. It can be contrasted with Wilde's rather more trenchant denunciation of landlords and their agents; W.R. Wilde, *Irish popular superstitions* (Dublin and London, 1852).

³⁸ D.H. Kelly, 'On certain antiquities recently discovered in the lake of Cloonfree, Co. Roscommon'

One of the four crannogs at Ardakillen was also trenched by the engineers, revealing that it was constructed of lower layers of peat, clay and stones, intermingled with ash and bone. A wooden palisade defined the islet and there was an enclosing stone wall constructed on the upper levels of the site. The largest crannog at Ardakillen produced up to fifty tons of animal bone, much of which was removed for manure. Near this crannog was a large dug-out canoe with a human skull, a bronze spearhead and a bronze pin, near this was a twenty foot long iron chain and collar.

The work of the engineers during the 1840s' drainage schemes was little short of astonishing. It should be remembered that in recording the sites to such detail, they were essentially employing the stratigraphical and contextual recording system that is the standard in modern archaeological excavations. Despite that, it does not seem to have been adopted by Irish antiquarians. It is worth pointing out that well into the twentieth century, Irish antiquarians were happily digging through sites, recording nothing but the weather and the names of local visitors.

William Wilde's 'Catalogue of antiquities', 1857

By 1857, Wilde had been interested in Irish crannogs for some 17 years. He had published his own notes on the animal bones from Lagore in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* for 1840,³⁹ and was later to be involved in several crannog surveys.⁴⁰ Wilde also wrote a tantalisingly brief, but fascinating, account of 'crannog folklore' around Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath that is revealing about ordinary people's perception of these islands.⁴¹ Indeed, it were his various notes on Irish crannogs, later to be abridged in Ferdinand Keller's account of European lake dwellings, that drew their attention to a wider audience.⁴²

However, it is probable that it is Wilde's *A descriptive catalogue of the antiquities in the museum of the Royal Irish Academy* that was most influential on crannog studies.⁴³ These catalogues were intended to present the Academy's collections at the proposed meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in 1857. Although

in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 5 (1850), pp. 208-214; Wood-Martin *lake dwellings*, pp 233-9.

³⁹ Wilde, 'Animal remains and antiquities recently found at Dunshaughlin', pp 420-6.

⁴⁰ W.R. Wilde, 'Account of three crannóges' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 7 (1857-1861), pp 147-53; W.R. Wilde, 'On a crannóge in the county of Cavan' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 8 (1861-1864), pp 274-8.

⁴¹ Wilde, 'Irish crannogs and Swiss Pfahlbanten', pp 831-2.

⁴² Ferdinand Keller, *The lake-dwellings of Switzerland and other parts of Europe* (London, 1866), pp 380-388.

⁴³ W.R. Wilde, *A descriptive catalogue*.

initially the responsibility of a committee under the direction of George Petrie, lack of progress meant that the task was handed over to William Wilde. Left with only four months to describe 10,000 artefacts, he abandoned the more difficult attempt to describe the material on a chronological basis and went for a Linnean classification based on raw material, function and use.⁴⁴ Part I catalogued articles of stone, earthenware, and vegetable matter,⁴⁵ while Part II dealt with copper, bronze and organic matter, while Part III was to describe gold, silver and iron.

Wilde stated that 46 crannogs were known. He noted that although they were alluded to since the ninth century, it was remarkable that it was not until 1839 that a crannog was first examined by antiquarians. Wilde stated that the clusters of lakes in the areas of Strokestown, Co. Roscommon, Keshcarrigan, Co. Leitrim, and Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan, were the districts where many crannogs were to be found. He described their typical form and made suggestions as to their defensive function.

‘They were not strictly speaking, artificial islands, but cluans, small islets or shallows of clay or marl, in these lakes, which were probably dry in summertime, but submerged in winter; these were enlarged and fortified by piles of oaken timber, and in some cases by stone-work. A few were approached by moles or causeways, but generally speaking they are completely insulated, and only accessible by boat; and it is notable that in almost every instance an ancient canoe was discovered in connexion with the crannoge. Being thus insulated, they afforded secure places of retreat from the attacks of enemies, or were the fastnesses of predatory chiefs or robbers, to which might be conveyed the booty of a marauding excursion, or the product of a cattle raid’.⁴⁶

Wilde followed the *catalogue* up with a short, well-illustrated article published in 1860, describing a ‘crannoge’ in Toneymore Lough, at Cloneygonnell td, Co. Cavan.⁴⁷ Situated in a small lake overlooked by ringfort-topped drumlin hills, the island was cut through by a railway line and was the subject of antiquarian excavations by the local Lord Farnham. Two smaller stockaded forts were noted in the shallows to the north. The various excavations exposed layers of timber (laid out in a complex fashion), bone and ash, retained within several palisades (120ft to 90ft in diameter). Wilde noted that the hillock was uneven, with mounds and possible hearths. The objects found included rotary querns, crucibles (possibly for metal-working) and polishing stones.

⁴⁴ Since the development of the ‘Three Age System’ (i.e. Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age) by the Danish antiquarian, Worsaae, a chronological approach would certainly have been more fashionable at the time.

⁴⁵ It was completed on August 24th 1857, two days before the commencement of the British Association meeting. It is arguably the first scientific museum catalogue produced in these islands and it won him the Cunningham Gold Medal of the R.I.A. and an international reputation.

⁴⁶ Wilde, *A descriptive catalogue*, p. 221.

⁴⁷ Wilde, ‘On a crannoge in the county of Cavan’, pp 274-278.

In another short article published in 1861, he described three crannoges, or stockaded islands, bringing the number of known Irish crannoges to forty-nine. It included an account of a crannog at Lough Rinn, Co. Leitrim (an islet with an artificial, built-up floor enclosed by very narrow wooden piles), a crannog at Derryhollow, Co. Antrim (with piles, stone hearths, weapons, tools and iron implements, copper, bronze and wooden dishes and bronze pins, as well as a coin of Charles II), and finally a crannog in the River Shannon at Castleforbes, Co. Longford. He complained of the poor preservation of dugout boat discoveries, noting that many had been broken up for firewood since their recovery. Wilde concluded this article with an important and perhaps highly influential statement on the culture and chronology of Irish crannoges, based on his comparisons with Scottish and Swisslake dwellings.

‘I think, I am warranted in stating, that the remains of flint and stone weapons and tools, in the Swiss crannoges, show that they were constructed by a people in a less advanced state than those who made the Irish crannoges, and that they were chronologically much anterior. Certainly the evidences derived from the antiquities found in ours, and which are chiefly of iron, refer them to a much later period than the Swiss; while we do not find any flint arrows, or stone celts, and but very few bronze weapons in our crannoges. Moreover, we have positive documentary evidence of the occupation of many of these fortresses in the time of Elizabeth, and some even later.’⁴⁸

Wood-Martin was later to write that this statement, claiming that Irish crannoges never produced stone artefacts, and only occasionally bronze, and were thus to be dated to between the ninth and the seventeenth centuries AD, was crucially influential.⁴⁹ In his opinion, it led Irish antiquarians to believe that little of prehistoric value could be found in Ireland’s crannoges (and perhaps detracted from any nascent interest amongst scholars solely interested in remote antiquity).

Other antiquaries were also active at the time. Rev. Dr. William Reeves published several historical references to crannoges (*insula fortificata*) in the Ulster Inquisitions of 1605. He noted that these sites were the ‘headquarters of a little territorial chieftaincy’ or ‘little primitive capitals’ of the neighbouring tuaths. He tentatively linked each named place to known crannog sites.⁵⁰ In a second paper he discussed some genealogical notes for the inhabitants of a crannog at Inishrush, Co. Antrim.⁵¹

⁴⁸ Wilde, ‘Account of three crannoges’, p. 152.

⁴⁹ Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, p. 26.

⁵⁰ W. Reeves, ‘On certain crannoges in Ulster’ in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 7c (1857-1861), pp 153-9.

⁵¹ W. Reeves, ‘An account of the crannog of Inishrush, and its ancient occupants’ in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 7

Early antiquarian surveys, excavations and syntheses, 1860-1932

George Morant, George Kinahan, William Wakeman, and other antiquarians, 1860-1886

By the 1860s, the deaths of Petrie, O'Donovan and O'Curry arguably lead to a loss of impetus in Irish archaeology.⁵² However, the growing antiquarian interest in crannogs was to lead to campaigns of survey and excavation by such workers as George Morant, the geologist George Kinahan and most importantly, William Wakeman. These fieldworkers were responsible for the publication of site descriptions, historical notes and folklore in diverse journals and newspapers, not all of them published in Ireland. For example, a crannog discovered at Drumkeery Lough, Co. Cavan was described along with its finds in a paper in the English journal *Archaeologia*.⁵³

In 1867, George Morant excavated an unusual wooden floor and hearth in a bog at Caraghoge, near Carrickmacross, Co. Monaghan. This was a platform (17ft 6 inches across) of logs and planks laid closely together, with a hearth of 'blue clay' and stones at the centre. The platform was approached by a timber trackway. The only finds consisted of considerable quantities of broken hazelnut shells, 'very rude' pottery and some small worked flints (rounded at one end). There was also a stone which Morant took to be a 'small corn-crusher'. Aware of the importance of stratigraphy, he closely examined the layers next to the floor in the hope of making finds and also showed a concern for the preservation of the structure, directing it to be covered with sods during the warm summer weather. The site was probably an early prehistoric wetland occupation site.⁵⁴

The use of historical references to specific sites was also increasingly common. While the Caraghoge probably dated to the Neolithic or Bronze Age, a crannog investigated in 1868 at Lough Annagh, Co. Offaly was clearly shown to be occupied in the seventeenth century. The site and its finds was described by General Dunne and Thomas Stanley, who usefully marshalled historical references to a battle between English and Irish forces on the neighbouring hill in 1691 to explain the occurrence of seventeenth-century objects on the site.⁵⁵ Another publication in 1870 of a sixteenth-century description of an assault by English troops on a crannog near Omagh also strengthened the recognition

(1857-1861), pp 163-215.

⁵² Michael Herity and George Eogan, *Ireland in prehistory* (London, 1977), p. 11.

⁵³ Robert Harkness, 'On a crannoge found in Drumkeery Lough, near Bailieborough, co. Cavan, Ireland' in *Archaeologia*, 39 (1863), pp 483-90.

⁵⁴ George Morant, 'Remains of an ancient oak structure found beneath a peat bog at Cargaghoge near Carrickmacross' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 10 (1868-1869), pp 269-70.

⁵⁵ Dunne, 'Notices of a cranog in Lough Annagh', pp 154-7.

that these islands were occupied in the period.⁵⁶ An brief debate was also published about this time in *The Irish Builder* concerning the etymology of the word 'crannog', with short notes on the subject by Rev. W. Kilbride⁵⁷ and J.B. Crowes.⁵⁸

Several antiquarians also now emerge who based their ideas on their own surveys and excavations. A good example is George Henry Kinahan (1829-1908), son of a Dublin barrister and holder of a Trinity College Diploma in Engineering. He joined the Geological Survey of Ireland in 1829. His early work, largely carried out in the west, was of a high standard and his *Manual of Geology of Ireland* is still considered a minor classic of Irish geology.⁵⁹ In later years, his apparent black moods and jealousy of his colleagues (particularly of Edward Hull, appointed over Kinahan's head as director of the Geological Survey in 1869) lead to his gradual marginalisation within the survey.

Despite this, Kinahan is recognised today as a major figure in the history of Irish geological studies. Less well-known is his contribution to crannog studies, to which he brought to an appreciation of geology, stratigraphy and the recognition of site and environmental change across time. This can be seen in his brief synthesis of Irish crannogs in his *Manual of geology of Ireland* published in 1868. It is a masterful, concise account that engages with diversity of form, structure and the idiosyncrasies of site occupation and abandonment. Much of his crannog studies undoubtedly occurred during his early geological fieldwork in the west, particularly in Donegal, Mayo and Galway. He excavated crannogs on Lough Rea, Co. Galway,⁶⁰ Ballinlough, Co. Galway,⁶¹ and Lough Naneevin, Co. Galway,⁶² and worked with Mr. Trench on a crannog on Lough Nahinch, Co. Tipperary.⁶³

Indeed, Kinahan was also one of the first to be truly interested in the practical and social aspects of the construction details of a crannog, urging others to closely record the details of a crannog's floor, its internal structures and the location of the hearth, as well as any stratigraphical or environmental (e.g. water level changes) evidence for different

⁵⁶ Dr. Caulfield, 'Assault on a crannog' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, (1870), pp 14-25.

⁵⁷ W. Kilbride, 'Etymology of "crannog"' in *The Irish Builder*, 2 (1869), pp 192-3.

⁵⁸ J. O'B. Crowes, 'Etymology of "crannog"' in *The Irish Builder*, 2 (1869), p. 201.

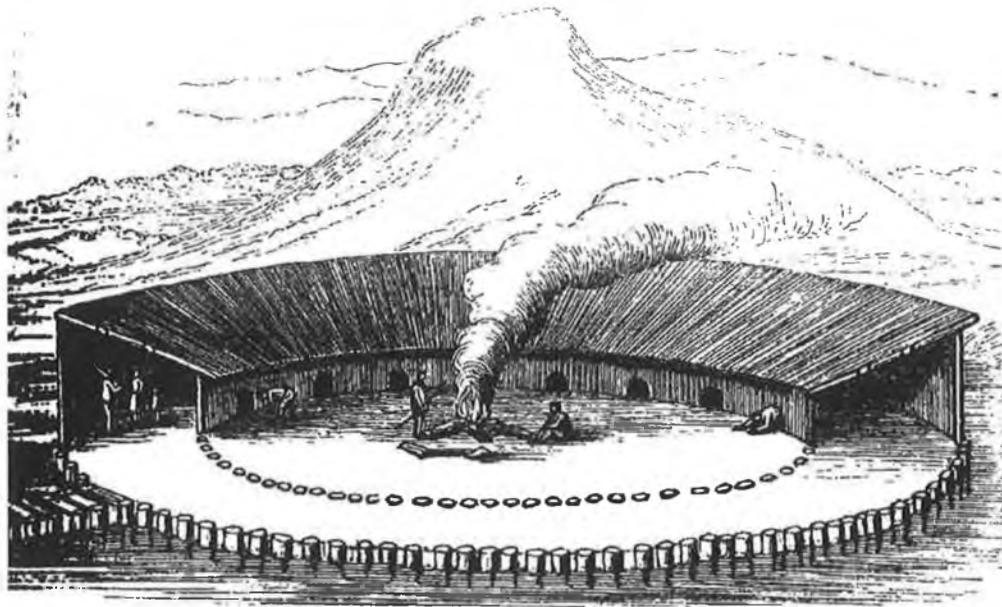
⁵⁹ G.H. Kinahan, *A manual of geology of Ireland* (London, 1868); some biographical notes on Kinahan's career in the survey are provided in G.L. Herries Davies, *Sheets of many colours* (Dublin, 1983), pp 216-22.

⁶⁰ Kinahan, 'On crannóges in Lough Rea', pp 412-27.

⁶¹ G.H. Kinahan, 'Notes on crannóges in Ballin Lough' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 9c (1864-1866), pp 172-6.

⁶² G.H. Kinahan, 'Notes on a crannóge in Lough Naneevin' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 10c (1866-1869), pp 31-3.

⁶³ Trench and Kinahan, 'Notes on a crannoge in Lough Nahinch', pp 176-9



IDEAL SKETCH OF THE CRANNOGE,*

Fig. 2.4 Kinahan's remarkable reconstruction drawing of an Irish crannog, based on his surveys of sites on Lough Naneevin, Co. Galway and perhaps inspired by ethnography. He imagined a circular house with a central courtyard, probably based on his observation of multiple palisades on sites (source: Kinahan. 'Notes on a crannoge in Lough Naneevin', p. 1).

phases of occupation. Kinahan also noted that the reason that some crannogs were larger was because they had been built on again and again, while smaller crannogs may have been abandoned at an earlier stage. He suggested that investigators needed to provide a site-plan and an account of any secondary stone structures.⁶⁴ He also attempted to interpret the nature of dwellings found on crannogs, wondering whether houses were to be found at the centre of crannogs or around the edges. In a remarkable reconstruction drawing (one of the first published of an Irish crannog) of Lough Naneevin, his artist depicts an unusual circular structure which occupies most of the island, enclosing an open-roofed central courtyard (Fig. 2.4).⁶⁵

However, of all the antiquarians working on Irish crannogs in the latter half of the nineteenth century, it is to William Wakeman (1822-1900) that is due most credit. If William Wood-Martin had not published his 1886 book *The lake dwellings of Ireland* (often largely based on Wakeman's notes and advice) it would undoubtedly be Wakeman

⁶⁴ G.H. Kinahan, 'Observations on the exploration of crannogs' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 11 (1870-1871), pp 459-61.

⁶⁵ Kinahan, 'Notes on a crannoge in Lough Naneevin', p. 31; Indeed, this reconstruction seems so similar to the communal dwellings centred around a circular courtyard of the Yanomo indians of Venezuela, that one wonders if he or the unnamed artist was inspired by an ethnographic text or public lecture they had seen.

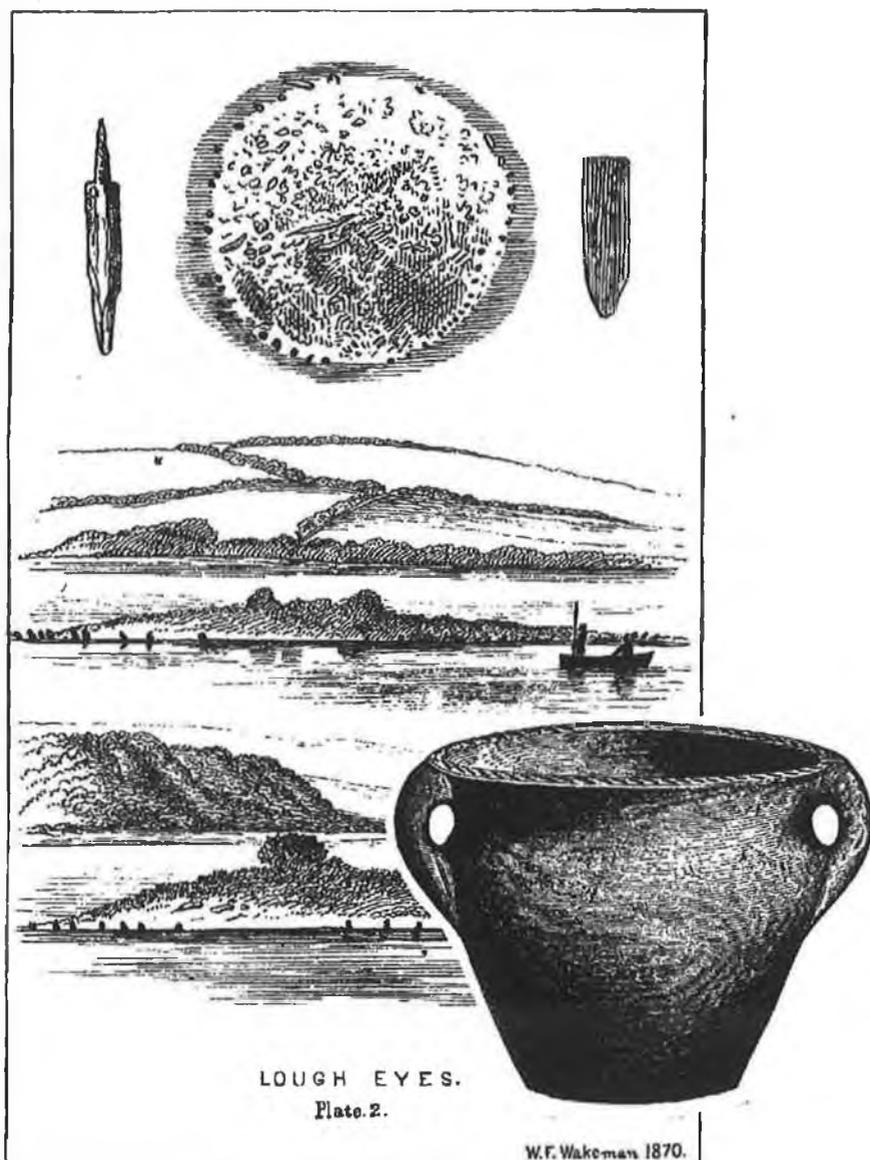


Fig. 2.5 Wakeman's site plan and landscape perspective of a crannog on Lough Eyes, Co. Fermanagh in 1870 and drawing of a late medieval everted rim-ware pot from the same lake, completed as part of his indefatigable surveys in the northwest. Wakeman's drawings served to embed images of Irish crannogs in the antiquarian sensibility (source: Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland*)

that we would most associate today with nineteenth century crannog studies. Wakeman's earliest encounter with a crannog was his own visit to Lagore in 1840, when he was a young draughtsman with the Topographical Section of the Ordnance Survey. By 1887, he had published a dozen articles on them. After the section collapsed, he studied for four years as an art student in London, before becoming drawing master at St. Columba's College, Stackallen, Co. Meath. Based there and between 1846-49, at a time when the famine was wreaking its worst ravages around Co. Meath, he re-visited Lagore crannog

and collected objects from the site. Years later, his compilation of a catalogue for the museum of the Royal Irish Academy was to include many of these same objects.

In the 1870s, when he was based at Portora Royal School, he also conducted excavations and surveys around Fermanagh, in particular, and illustrated them in various articles. Indeed, one of the most attractive aspects of Wakeman's work is his ability to convey in site plan, scenic view and object illustration, the essence of many of these sites. By the early 1880s, he had struck up a friendship with Wood-Martin, and was to pass on to the younger man (Wakeman was 64, Wood-Martin was 39), much of his knowledge and experience, while also providing most of the site and object illustrations for his book (Fig. 2.5).

Wakeman himself published various accounts of crannogs at Ballydoolough, Co. Fermanagh,⁶⁶ Drumgay Lake, near Enniskillen,⁶⁷ Lough Eyes, Co. Fermanagh,⁶⁸ Cornagall, Co. Cavan,⁶⁹ and at Drumdarragh, (Trillick) and Lankhill, Co. Fermanagh.⁷⁰ At Ballydoolough, Co. Fermanagh, either drainage or long-term drought revealed a submerged forest on the bed of a small lake, as well as a small island with post-medieval pottery, wooden artefacts and animal bone scattered around the surface. An unusual rectangular wooden structure was also exposed at the centre of the island. There were several crannogs exposed on Lough Eyes and these appeared to be linked by peat and wooden causeways, leading Wakeman and later Wood-Martin to conjecture that these were once the settlements of a lake village community.⁷¹ Wakeman published several significant regional reviews of crannogs in Fermanagh, noting at one point the existence of 29 different crannogs in eighteen different places in the county.⁷² Wood-Martin, who later summarised much of these surveys and discoveries, was similarly aware of the importance of the lake islands in the wars of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and

⁶⁶ W.F. Wakeman, 'On the crannog at Ballydoolough, Co. Fermanagh' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 11 (1870-1871), pp 360-71.

⁶⁷ W. F. Wakeman, 'Remarks upon three hitherto unnoticed crannogs in Drumgay Lake, near Enniskillen' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 11 (1870-1871), pp. 232-235; W.F. Wakeman, 'Crannogs in Drumgay Lake, near Enniskillen' in *The Irish Builder*, 250 (1870), p. 12.

⁶⁸ Wakeman, 'The crannogs in Lough Eyes, Co. Fermanagh', pp 553-64.

⁶⁹ W.F. Wakeman, 'On some iron tools discovered in the crannog of Cornagall, Co. Cavan' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 11 (1870-1871), pp 461-5.

⁷⁰ W.F. Wakeman, 'The crannogs of Drumdarragh, otherwise Trillick, and Lankhill, Co. Fermanagh' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 17 (1885-1886), pp 372-89.

⁷¹ Wood-Martin, *Traces of the elder faiths of Ireland*, pp 222-4.

⁷² Wakeman, 'Observations on the principal crannogs of Fermanagh', p. 216; W.F. Wakeman, 'On certain recent discoveries of ancient crannog structures', pp 324-39; W.F. Wakeman, 'Bronze pin and a carved wooden vessel, Co. Fermanagh' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 15 (1879-1882), pp 97-9.

would suggest Medieval and Post-Medieval occupation phases for some of them⁷³. Other scholars active at the time included S.F. Milligan who described the crannogs or lake dwellings of Cavan in a paper presented to the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association of Ireland, which was also published in *The Irish Builder*.⁷⁴

Discoveries at Lisnacrogher and Lough Mourne, Co. Antrim

Events in early 1882 revealed the essential character of antiquarian collecting in Ireland, a pursuit devoted to enhancing either personal or institutional collections. Workmen cutting turf on the bed of a drained lake at Lisnacrogher, Co. Antrim, uncovered a massive hoard of Iron Age artefacts. The finds, which included bronze scabbards, iron swords, bronze spearheads, spearbutts, bronze ornaments, iron tools, and a range of other high-status objects were found somewhere in, or on the border between, Carcoagh and Lisnacrogher townlands. However, one of the problems of Irish archaeology is understanding the relationship between the metalwork and a mysterious wooden structure seemingly exposed at the same time. Unfortunately, the site was mostly destroyed by the time Irish antiquarians had realised its importance and in any case, it was jealously guarded by its owner. R.A.S. Macalister later described in bitter tones the destruction of the site, stating that,

Every scholar must feel, when this place is mentioned, that a periodical act of humiliation should be performed in the shrine of Irish archaeology ... Let it suffice to say that Lisnacrogher was the site of a lake-dwelling which had the misfortune to lie close at hand to the dwelling of a collector of whom it was said, among other virtues recorded in an obituary notice, that "he made it a rule never to leave his house without carrying back something to enrich his collection". The lake-dwelling of Lisnacrogher was for such a man a gold-mine, and he spent much of his spare time in looting it (to use the only adequate expression).⁷⁵

Wakeman visited the site and has provided the most complete contemporary accounts.⁷⁶ He described it as being situated within the boundary of a formerly drained lough in the townland of Lisnacroghera and noted large quantities of timber, some with mortised ends, and encircling stakes and also noted possible post-and-wattle. Although it may have been an Iron Age structure, it seems more likely that it was an early medieval

⁷³ Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, p. 181-3.

⁷⁴ S.F. Milligan, 'On crannógs in county Cavan' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 17 (1885-1886), pp 148-52; S.F. Milligan, 'Crannogs or lake-dwellings in the county Cavan' in *The Irish Builder* 27, (1885), p. 229.

⁷⁵ Macalister, *The archaeology of Ireland*, p. 242.

⁷⁶ W.F. Wakeman, 'Trouvaille of the Bronze and Iron Age finds from the crannog at Lisnacroghera, Co. Antrim' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 16 (1883-1884), pp 375-408; W.F. Wakeman, 'On the crannog and antiquities of Lisnacroghera, near Broughshane, Co. Antrim' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 19 (1889), pp 96-106; W.F. Wakeman, 'On the crannog and antiquities of Lisnacroghera, near Broughshane, Co. Antrim' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 21 (1890-1891), pp 673-5.

crannog coincidentally exposed at the time near the hoard site. Certainly this was the explanation proposed by the Scottish antiquary and crannog expert, Robert Munro, on his visit in 1886.⁷⁷ In any case, even if it was a crannog, it hints at the continuing symbolic importance of the place into the early Middle Ages.

Other crannogs were being explored at this time elsewhere in Co. Antrim. At Lough Ravel, Loughmagarry and Loughtarmin, crannogs had been known since earlier in the century and numerous finds had been taken from Toome Bar, at the mouth of the River Bann on Lough Neagh. A particularly interesting group, which inspired much Irish and Scottish antiquarian interest, was found in 1882 at Lough Mourne, near Carrickfergus. A temporary lowering of water levels in a lake near the sea exposed a group of four small stone cairns, a larger crannog and a wooden canoe. The cairns were built of mounds of stone laid over wooden foundations and piling. The larger crannog lay in deeper water and was built in a fashion reminiscent of Scottish types, with timbers radiating from the centre and mortised at their outer ends to vertical piles.⁷⁸

Wood-Martin's *The lake dwellings of Ireland*, 1886

By 1886, there were at least 220 known crannogs in Ireland. In this year, the Sligo landlord and antiquary, William Gregory Wood-Martin (1847-1917) published his synthesis *The lake dwellings of Ireland or ancient lacustrine habitations of Erin commonly called crannogs*. It crystallised nineteenth-century thinking about the origins, history, technology and functions of Irish crannogs and was to shape the ways that all subsequent authors wrote about the subject. Although Wood-Martin contributed relatively little else to crannog studies (a single article and notes in other books), his book could 'still be regarded as a seminal work. There has been little synthesis since'.⁷⁹

William Gregory Wood-Martin (1847-1917) was born in Sligo, educated in Ireland, Switzerland and Belgium and joined the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst in 1866, before leaving in the same year to join the 24th Regiment.⁸⁰ By the time he was married

⁷⁷ R. Munro, 'The structural features of lake-dwellings' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 24 (1894), pp 105-14, pp 210-21; Barry Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland* (London, 1994), p. 184.

⁷⁸ Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, pp. 171-3; W. Gray, 'The crannogs of Lough Mourne' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 16 no 6, (1883-1884), p. 177; W. Gray, 'A crannoge canoe from Lough Mourne, county of Antrim' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 16 (1883-1884), pp. 371-2; W.J. Lockwood, 'The examination of crannógs in Lough Mourn, near Carrickfergus' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 16 (1883-1884), pp 194-195; Robert Munro 'Notes of lake-dwellings in Lough Mourn, Co. Antrim. Ireland' in *S.A.S. Proc.*, 8 (1885-1886), pp 321-330; G.E. Reilly, 'The crannóges of Lough Mourn, Co. Antrim' in *U.J.A.*, 8 (1902), pp 1-4.

⁷⁹ Edwards, *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland*, p. 35.

⁸⁰ For a recent biography of Wood-Martin, see A.M. Ireland, 'Colonel William Gregory Wood-Martin: Antiquary, 1847-1917', *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 10 (2001), pp 1-11.

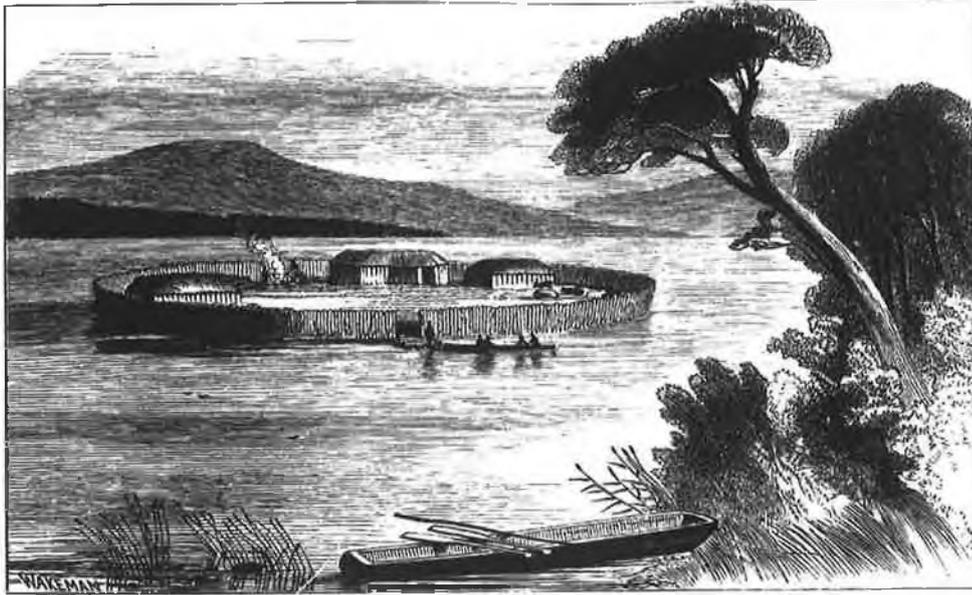
with a family, he returned to Sligo to serve as High Sheriff, which provided him with both income and time to write his numerous books. He was active in various historical associations (such as the Royal Irish Academy), although he was to have a troubled relationship in later life with the Royal Historical and Archaeological Association, based in Kilkenny.⁸¹ He was to be a prolific author. His first major archaeological work was *The Rude Stone Monuments of Ireland* (1888), to be followed by the *History of Sligo, County and Town* (1882-1892), *Pagan Ireland* (1895) and *Traces of the Elder Faiths of Ireland* (1902) with the latter including a section on lake dwellings.

However he is best remembered for his classic work on Irish crannogs, *The lake dwellings of Ireland*. The book was largely based on a review of the many articles and notes by then published in Irish journals. Wood-Martin made particular use of the work and advice of his fellow antiquaries; George Kinahan and William Wakeman (Fig. 2.6). He was partly inspired, like many of his contemporaries, by contemporary European work particularly Ferdinand Keller's *The lake dwellings of Switzerland and other parts of Europe* (1866, translated in 1878) and Robert Munro's *Ancient Scottish lake dwellings or Crannogs* (1882). In a letter to James Fergusson, he expressed a wish to write an Irish work, as there had been a lake dwellings book on

Switzerland out quite lately, Scotland has had their chroniclers on the subject whilst Ireland in which these lacustrine remains were first discovered remains unrecorded except in scattered paper in various scientific publications.⁸²

The book was divided into two parts. In Part I, Wood-Martin described on a thematic basis the many structures and finds known from Irish crannogs. In Part II, he provided a descriptive catalogue of crannogs, organised on a province and county basis. The book begins with an introductory chapter that attempted to describe the wooded and wild nature of ancient Ireland. The succeeding chapters describe the structure of wooden and stone crannogs, their siting, palisades, gangways and canoes. There were ten chapters on the finds from crannogs, including stone, bronze and iron finds, food and vegetable remains, objects of household economy, personal ornaments, musical instruments, gaming pieces, ogham inscriptions, money, horse pieces and other miscellaneous articles. There was an extensive chapter on historical references to chapters. William Wakeman illustrated the book, with forty-one crannog reconstruction drawings, site plans and sections and one hundred and ninety-seven drawings of artefacts. The *Lake dwellings of Ireland* became the standard reference work for all subsequent crannog research.

⁸¹ The ancestor of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland.



IRISH LAKE DWELLING OF THE ISOLATED TYPE.
Ideally restored from inspection of numerous sites.

Fig. 2.6 William Wakeman's iconic and enduring reconstruction drawing of an Irish crannog, reproduced as the frontispiece of Wood-Martin's *The lake dwellings of Ireland*, 'ideally restored from inspection of numerous sites'. (Source: Wood-Martin, *The lake dwellings of Ireland*).

Wood-Martin subsequently published other accounts of Irish crannogs.⁸³ One reader of his book, Owen Smith, contacted Wood-Martin with information about a crannog near Nobber, Co. Meath. In June 1887, Wood-Martin exhibited objects from the crannog at the *Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* museum. These were later sent to the *Royal Irish Academy* museum. Wood-Martin obtained a grant from the Royal Irish Academy to further investigate the site. He apparently completed a paper on these excavations, but inexplicably it was not published. Wood-Martin's main contribution lay in synthesis rather than fieldwork, and his subsequent works were to display an ability to use archaeology, history, geology and folklore. He strongly emphasised the importance of archaeology as providing its own insights into the past, in the face of his contemporaries who were more willing to see it as a mere side-light to their more fanciful uses of texts.

⁸² National Library of Ireland, MS 10,80n.d.; quoted in Ireland, 'Wood-Martin', p. 4.

⁸³ W.G. Wood-Martin, 'Description of a crannog site in the county Meath' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 16 (1886), pp 480-4; There were also sections on crannogs (including an illustration of flints from Moynagh Lough) in W.G. Wood-Martin's *Pagan Ireland* (London, 1895) and in his *Traces of the elder faiths of Ireland* (London, 1902).

George Buick, Rev. D'Arcy, George Coffey and the new century, 1890-1920

As often happens, Wood-Martin's book did not necessarily improve the quality of subsequent crannog investigations. Between 1887 and 1893, George Buick carried out five summer's worth of digging on a crannog at Moylurg, near Cullybackey, Co. Antrim.⁸⁴ The excavations were certainly exhaustive in one sense, as Buick claimed that 'every spadeful of material' was closely examined for finds. Unfortunately, despite the previous high quality work achieved by Kinahan and Wakeman, the recording strategies employed at Moylurg were appalling. It is not evident that any site plans or sections were drawn, the only illustrations included in the report are photographs, so the site is difficult to assess in terms of its structural appearance and chronology. As with many Irish crannogs, there are hints of some Neolithic and Bronze Age occupation. Finds from a spread of ash and bone at the centre included a stone axe, pottery, flint scrapers and a hollow-based arrowhead, while a large number of flint cores, scrapers and flakes and two stone axe fragments were found elsewhere about the site.⁸⁵ Unfortunately, the stratigraphy of this possible hearth is unclear, even contradictory. In other respects, Moylurg appears to have been a classic early medieval crannog, even a high-status one. It produced such early medieval finds as a decorated bronze ladle of eighth-century date, a pennanular brooch, a bronze ingot with its stone mould, a crucible fragment and stones for sharpening bronze pins, a barrel padlock and spindle whorls, glass beads and bracelets, leather objects and iron knives. The pottery appears to have been largely souterrain ware of early medieval date, although some prehistoric pottery and post-medieval may also have been present. It seems to have been enclosed by a large timber palisade or ring of posts and horizontal timber planks and beams were also noted in the internal areas.

The end of the century witnessed a flurry of activity. It is also evident that a much wider range of individuals became involved in the identification of sites. In 1894, the Scottish crannog expert, Robert Munro wrote two papers in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland* on the subject of Swisllake dwellings, in particular describing their structural features.⁸⁶ Scholars now also described stone forts on islands and speculated on their essentially crannog nature. A stone-fort in Lough-na-Cranagh, Co. Antrim on the coast at Fair Head had already been investigated in 1885.⁸⁷ In 1897, E.L. Layard described 'fortified stone lake dwellings in Lough Skannive, Connemara and subsequently

⁸⁴ G.R. Buick, 'The crannog of Moylurg' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 23 (1893), pp. 27-43 ; G.R. Buick, 'The crannog of Moylurg' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 24 (1894), pp 316-31.

⁸⁵ Buick, 'The crannog of Moylurg' (1893), pp. 28-39.

⁸⁶ Munro, 'The structural features of lake-dwellings', pp 105-114, pp. 210-221.

⁸⁷ A. M'Henry, 'Crannóg of Lough na Cranagh, Fair Head, Co. Antrim' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 16 (1886), pp. 462.

for a stone fort on an island in Lough Cullen, Co. Mayo.⁸⁸ In the same year, George Kinahan referred to stone forts on Lough Bola, in Gorteen Lough, Co. Donegal, and to forts on islands in Lough Mask, Lough Corrib and Lough Cong.⁸⁹ W.J. Knowles described a number of finds from Carcoagh crannog, Co. Antrim, adjacent to the Lisnacrogher Iron Age hoard.⁹⁰ In 1898, the Rev. William Falkiner described an early medieval crannog with bronze and bone artefacts, timbers and animal bone at Lough-a-Trim, Co. Westmeath.⁹¹ Rev. D'Arcy published the results of his crannog excavations in Killyvilla Lake, Co. Monaghan⁹², followed by an account of his excavations of two lake dwellings at Drumacrittin, Co. Fermanagh.⁹³ Bardan described crannogs at Lough-a-Trim and White Lough, Co. Westmeath.⁹⁴

In 1901, George Coffey and W.J. Knowles and a team of nine assistants excavated a crannog at Craigywarren, Co. Antrim, over a two-week period in September-August (where incidentally they were assisted by the Rev. George Buick.⁹⁵ The site was a small early medieval crannog located at a depth of about six feet in a bog, about eighty yards out from the former western shore of the original lake and about half a mile south of Lisnacrogher crannog, the reputed nineteenth-century findspot of an assemblage of La Tène metalwork. The crannog was small and circular, measuring only about 14m in diameter, defined at its edge by a lightly built palisade. The habitation was constructed of a primary layer of heather and small branches on the underlying black mud, followed by an second layer of horizontal trunks and branches, followed by another layer of heather. Spreads of stone and several adzed planks and mortised timbers were found within, and on, this surface. A spread of mortised beams adjacent to the 'kitchen-midden' on the northeast corner of the crannog was interpreted as the remains of a house. The site produced a range of lithic finds, including flint flakes, scrapers, an arrowhead, three polishing stones, spindle whorls and a stone axe fragment. The excavators decided that the flints were not strike-a-lights. However, because there were no cores to indicate on-

⁸⁸ E.L. Layard, 'Fortified stone lake-dwellings on islands in Lough Skannive, Connemara' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 27 (1897), pp 373-8; E.L. Layard, 'On a fortified stone lake-dwelling on an island in Lough Cullen, County Mayo' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 29 (1899), pp. 32-4.

⁸⁹ G.H. Kinahan, 'Stone crannóge in Lough Bola' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 27 (1897), p. 438.

⁹⁰ W.J. Knowles, 'Portion of a harp and other objects found in the crannóge of Carncoagh, Co. Antrim' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 27 (1897), pp. 114-5.

⁹¹ W. Falkiner, 'Notice of a crannog at Loughatrim, Killucan, county of Westmeath' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 21, (1898-1900), pp. 216-7.

⁹² S.A. D'Arcy, 'A crannog near Clones' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 27 (1897), pp 205-20, pp 389-403.

⁹³ S.A. D'Arcy, 'An account of the examination of two lake-dwellings in the neighbourhood of Clones' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 30 (1900), pp 204-44.

⁹⁴ P. Bardan, 'Lough-a-Trim crannoge, Co. Westmeath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 27 (1898), p. 276 ; P. Bardan, 'White Lough crannoge, Co. Westmeath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 27 (1898), pp 275-6.

⁹⁵ Coffey, 'Craigywarren crannog', pp 109-18.

site flint working, they felt that the flints were introduced on to the site with stone and gravel during its construction. It is also possible that there were deliberately brought onto the site in the early Middle Ages. Early medieval finds included a silvered, plain pennanular brooch, a brooch pin fragment, bracelet, disc and ring. An early medieval iron sword was found below the timbers and other iron finds included a possible spear butt, two billhooks, a chisel, an iron pan and an unknown object, which may have been a barrel-padlock key. Plain souterrain pottery and clay crucibles were recovered, one of the latter had red vitreous matter on its surface, possibly the remains of melted enamel. Animal bone from the site included red deer, cattle, sheep/goat, pig and three horse skulls. The finds indicated to the excavators the presence of both craft-workers and relatively wealthy inhabitants and the site was dated, on the basis of the pennanular brooch, to the tenth century AD. It is likely that this date is much too late. The brooch, sword, plain souterrain pottery and the decorated leather shoes probably date to the sixth to seventh century AD.⁹⁶

Another crannog at Loughgall, Co. Armagh was noted at the same time by R.G. Berry.⁹⁷ W.J. Knowles described several crannog sites in Antrim and Derry, including that of Inishrush, Co. Antrim.⁹⁸ The crannog on Loughbrickland, Co. Down was also described, where a palisaded island produced charcoal and ash, coarse pottery and iron slag.⁹⁹ Crannogs were found at Mountcashel, Co. Clare, Drumcliff and Clareen, Co. Clare.¹⁰⁰ H.T. Knox described worked stone on one crannog.¹⁰¹ R.A.S. Macalister, George Armstrong and Lloyd Praeger excavated a medieval 'crannog' or marshland settlement at Loch Pairc, Co. Galway. Indeed this was the first Irish archaeological excavation on which it could be said that palaeoenvironmental studies played an active role in the interpretations.¹⁰² Lyttleton has recently re-interpreted Loch Pairc crannog. He has suggested that it was probably a late medieval encampment or campaign stronghold

⁹⁶ See Michael Ryan, 'Native pottery in Early Medieval Ireland' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 73c (1973), pp. 619-45, at p. 625, for the suggestion that the site could be sixth to seventh-century AD in date.

⁹⁷ R.G. Berry, 'Crannoge at Loughgall, County of Armagh' in *U.J.A.*, 12 (1906), p. 16.

⁹⁸ W.J. Knowles, 'Crannógs or artificial islands in the counties of Antrim and Derry' in *U.J.A.*, 9 (1903), pp 168-76; W.J. Knowles, 'Crannógs or artificial islands in the counties of Antrim and Derry' in *U.J.A.*, 10 (1904), pp 26-32, pp 49-56.

⁹⁹ H.W. Lett, 'The island in Lough Bricklan (Loughbrickland, County Down)' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 35 (1905), pp 249-54.

¹⁰⁰ T.J. Westropp, 'Crannoge at Mountcashel, County Clare' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 31 (1901), pp 433-4; D. Parkinson, 'Some notes on the Clare crannógs of Drumcliff and Clareen', *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 35 (1905), pp 391-401.

¹⁰¹ H.T. Knox, 'Carved stone found in a crannóg' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 38 (1908), pp 280-1.

¹⁰² R.A.S. Macalister, E.C.R. Armstrong and R.L. Praeger, 'The excavation of Loch Pairc crannog near Tuam' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 32c, (1914), pp 147-51.

situated in marshlands, rather than an early medieval crannog.¹⁰³ Oddly, at this stage, crannog research appears to fall away. In his book, *The archaeology of Ireland*, published in 1928, R.A.S. Macalister commented about crannog studies: 'A field untilled, almost fallow, awaits the systematic student of this later lake-dwelling civilisation, the available literature of which is painfully amateurish and unsystematic'. It was to change dramatically in the 1930s, mainly through the work of the Harvard Archaeological Expedition to Ireland.

The impact of the Harvard Archaeological Mission, 1932-1970

The Harvard Archaeological Mission in the 1930s and 1940s

The Harvard Archaeological Expedition to Ireland was one of the major developments of Irish archaeology. It constituted one part of the Harvard Irish Survey which co-ordinated by Prof. Earnest Albert Hooton and Lloyd Warner of the Dept. of Anthropology, Harvard University and funded from a Rockefeller grant, as well as contributions by Harvard University and the Irish government. The Harvard Irish Survey aimed to combine physical anthropology, social anthropology and archaeological investigations to explore the "origins and development of the races and culture of the Irish, so that the combined disciplines would 'contribute to a single unified anthropological history and analysis of this gifted and virile nation'.¹⁰⁴ The archaeologists aimed to explore the prehistory and proto-history of the island. The social anthropologists intended a survey of a typical Irish county (Clare), while the physical anthropologists embarked on an adequate sampling of the Irish population in every part of the island to establish their racial origins and 'constitutional proclivities'. The hopes for the publication of an integrated study ultimately proved impossible, as funding dried up and individual researchers obtained paid employment elsewhere.

The archaeological aspects of the survey, carried out over a continuous five-year programme between 1932 and 1936, were led by the young American archaeologists Hallam L. Movius and Hugh O'Neill Hencken (then in his early 30s). Hallam L. Movius (1907-1987) born in Newton, Massachusetts, was a Professor at Harvard University from 1930 to 1977. He is widely regarded as the most distinguished Palaeolithic

¹⁰³ James Lyttleton, 'Loughpark 'crannog' re-visited' in *Galway. Archaeol.Hist. Soc. Jn.*, 50 (1998), pp 151-83.

¹⁰⁴ For a brief history of the Harvard Irish survey, see A. Byrne, R. Edmondson and T. Varley, 'Introduction to the third edition' in C.M. Arensberg and S.T. Kimball, *Family and community in Ireland* (Harvard, 1940, re-print 2001), pp i-ci; For my previous discussion of the political background to the Harvard Archaeological Mission, see Aidan O'Sullivan, 'The Harvard Archaeological Mission and the politics of the Irish Free State' in *Arch. Ire.*, 63 (2003), pp 20-3.

archaeologist of his generation for not only his pioneering research on human evolution in southeast Asia, but also for his work on the Upper Palaeolithic of south-west France. It has been claimed that 'Movius laid the foundation for modern archaeologists by introducing techniques and methodologies that are used today.'¹⁰⁵ Hugh O'Neill Hencken (1902-1981), then assistant curator of European Archaeology at Harvard University, was also widely regarded later as one of the most eminent European prehistorians of his time. His undergraduate work saw him studying in Cornwall, and he was also to direct projects in Slovenia and Italy, where he studied the nature and origin of the Etruscans.¹⁰⁶

The Harvard Archaeological Expedition began fieldwork in 1932 and 17 archaeological sites were investigated in 5 years. Major programmes of archaeological excavation were carried out on three crannogs; the neighbouring sites of Ballinderry crannog No. 1, Co. Westmeath¹⁰⁷ and Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Offaly,¹⁰⁸ and Lagore, Co. Meath.¹⁰⁹ The archaeological programme sought and received support from Irish professional archaeologists, government officials, National Museum of Ireland employees, as well as the 'physical labour of Ireland's unemployed'. The Irish government contributed funding for labour and research, channelled through the Board of Works and the National Museum. There was some initial controversy and resistance amongst some professional and amateur archaeologists, who had to be assured by the Harvard Irish Survey that its intentions were solely scientific and that all objects would remain the property of the state (many were subsequently sold by Harvard University to the National Museum of Ireland. The Rev. Larry Murray (editor of the County Louth Archaeological Journal) was particularly concerned about the disturbance of ancient burial grounds. He pointed out that local beliefs about the ill-luck of disturbing ancient sites effectively provided protection for them, but that the Harvard Survey's 'ghoulish performances...will blunt the susceptibilities of the ordinary people, and thereby hasten the work of the destruction'.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁵ For a biography of Movius, see

http://emuseum.mnsu.edu/information/biography/klmno/movius_hallam.html

¹⁰⁶ For a biography of Hencken, see Paul Ashbee, 'Hugh O'Neill Hencken (1902-1981) and his Archaeology of Cornwall and Scilly and beyond' in *Cornish Archaeology*, 21 (1982), pp 179-82.

¹⁰⁷ Hugh O'Neill Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannóg no. 1' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 43c, (1936), pp 103-239; for a recent structural reinterpretation of the site, see Ruth Johnson, 'Ballinderry crannóg No. 1: a reinterpretation' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 99 c (1999), pp 23-71.

¹⁰⁸ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannóg no. 2', pp 1-76.

¹⁰⁹ Hencken, 'Lagore crannóg', pp 1-248.



Fig. 2.7 The Harvard Archaeological Expedition archaeologists, Hallam L. Movius and Hugh O'Neill Hencken, with Dr. Adolf Mahr, director of the National Museum of Ireland, at their first summer's excavations at the early medieval crannog of Ballinderry No. 1, Co. Westmeath. The Harvard Mission aimed to provide powerful new narratives about the 'origins of the Irish.' (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry no. 1').

Otherwise, the investigations seem to have been broadly supported by the archaeological community, who welcomed the new discoveries, the experience of new fieldwork methodologies and the prospect of publications. Dr. Adolf Mahr, director of the National Museum, certainly supported it. He himself recommended that the expedition should investigate Ballinderry crannog No. 1, where he had himself found a Viking sword in 1935, and he subsequently sent Hencken a barrel of wood preservative from the museum to enable on-site artefact conservation.

It is fairly clear that a 'Celtic origins' ethos lay behind the Harvard Archaeological Expedition, as might be expected of the times. In 1932 (the first year of archaeological fieldwork), the Irish Free State was in the hands of *Fíanna Fáil* (with definite prospects of a renewed Civil War) and was in the initial stages of the economic war with England. The Gaelic language and games were being renewed, the Catholic church was at the height of its power and there was a strong cultural movement to promote an Irish identity and resist outside (particularly English) influences. It is evident, for example,

¹¹⁰ L.P. Murray, 'The cemetery cairn at Knockast' in *Louth Arch. Soc. Jn.*, 8, no. 1, (1933), pp 65-8.

that there was little or no attempt to explore any archaeological topics dating to after the early Middle Ages. Archaeological objects of later periods (e.g. seventeenth and eighteenth century coins) found on sites were frequently ignored and occasionally not even included in reports. The Harvard Irish Survey, aware of potential animosity to the programme in Ireland, engaged in a public relations and press campaign on both sides of the Atlantic (Fig. 2.7).

A sense of how successful this was can be traced from contemporary local and national newspaper accounts such as *The Irish Times*, *The Irish Independent* and *The Irish Press*. Several articles were published about the crannog excavations. The highly scientific approaches employed, and the high quality and cultural uniqueness of the finds, were both lauded. In late September 1932, Hencken and Movius spoke to the press at a reception at the National Museum of Ireland, Dublin, before going home to America, on their first summer season at Ballinderry crannog No. 1.¹¹¹ Most attention was drawn to the discovery on the crannog of the tenth century wooden gaming board (possibly for the board game *Hnefatafl*)¹¹² and bronze hanging lamp. Praising Ireland's archaeological heritage, Hencken himself apparently opined to a reporter from *The Irish Independent* (a newspaper with nationalist, if strongly Free State, credentials) that "Outside a classical country, say Italy or Greece, it is seldom you find such an enormous quantity of material and of such a very high calibre as was found at Ballinderry". Revealingly, the paper also reported that the site could be taken as representing the life at the time in 'Christian Gaelic Ireland a couple of centuries before the English invasion'. As revealing perhaps, was the fact that *The Irish Times* (a newspaper with broadly British or Unionist sympathies) also reported (alone of the newspapers) that very many other things were found in the crannog, including 'Elizabethan coins and even James II coins'.¹¹³

The Harvard Irish Survey also conducted a series of interviews with Irish politicians (including the Taoiseach, Éamon de Valera) and clerics, seeking their support and approval. The success of this can be seen in a letter (currently held in the topographical archives of the National Museum) written by the Minister for Education, Tomás Ó Deirg, to Hencken (then resident at Hibernian Hotel, in Dawson Street) dated to 24th

¹¹¹ Anon. 'Discovering the hidden Ireland: American scientists striking finds: A 1000 year old lamp', *The Irish Independent*, 29th September, 1932. Various other press reports about the Ballinderry crannog No. 1 finds are included in the N.M.I. Top. Files: Kilcumeragh twd, Co. Westmeath, n.M.I. 1932:6582;

¹¹² Hugh O'Neill Hencken, 'A gaming board of the Viking Age' in *Acta Archaeologica* 4 (1933), pp 85-104.

¹¹³ Anon. 'Moate finds in Museum: An interesting collection: Dr Hencken tells of his work', *The Irish Times*, 10th October, 1932.

September 1932. He congratulated him on the success of the Ballinderry crannog excavations and stated that,

I consider it my duty also to request you to convey an expression of the appreciation and gratitude of the Govt. of the Irish Free State to the Authorities of Harvard University for their generous action in sending an expedition under your able direction to assist in bringing to light and disclosing to the world the treasures buried in the historic sites of our country, and thus contributing to a fuller knowledge of its ancient civilisation.¹¹⁴

It is undeniable that the Harvard expedition had a major impact on Irish archaeology.¹¹⁵ Certainly, one reason for this was the fact that the excavation reports were fully published in the *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* and in the *Journal of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland*, usually in great detail. It is also commonly stated that the expedition introduced systematic excavation techniques to Irish archaeology, though the crannog sites were hardly dug well.

There was little attempt to tap the rich potential of the waterlogged deposits for detailed archaeological and palaeoenvironmental investigations. John Coles has recently convincingly argued that the crannogs were dug in essentially a nineteenth-century fashion, with only a poor record kept of each site's stratigraphy and their structural evolution.¹¹⁶ There was also little real attempt to explore the sites' environmental contexts or domestic economies. Knud Jessen and Frank Mitchell did carry out some pollen analysis at Ballinderry crannog No. 2 and there was a brief experiment with tree-ring studies at Ballinderry crannog No. 1, abandoned due to a perceived lack of success. It could be argued that the intimidating scale of the excavations stifled the subsequent development of wetland archaeology in Ireland, and that the publication of its objects actually contributed to the overarching interest of Irish archaeologists in typological, art and ornament studies between 1930-1960. The Ballinderry and Lagore crannog excavations produced huge artefactual assemblages, which were to provide the wellspring of many subsequent typological and artefactual studies. The Harvard Mission's results may also have encouraged Irish archaeology was to concentrate on cultural-historical interpretations, when archaeologists in other countries (in America in particular) were embarking on multidisciplinary settlement and landscape studies.

¹¹⁴ N.M.I. Top. Files: Kilcumeragh twd, Co. Westmeath, N.M.I. 1932:6582.

¹¹⁵ Cooney, 'Theory and practice in Irish archaeology', pp 263-273.

¹¹⁶ Coles, 'Irish wetland archaeology: From opprobrium to opportunity', pp 5-6; In his favour, Hencken was unlucky in his choice of sites to excavate. Both Lagore and Ballinderry No. 2 had been badly damaged by antiquarian diggings into the mounds, making his task all the more difficult.

The Harvard expedition inspired much interest and confidence amongst Irish archaeologists. Adolf Mahr and Harold Leask used its impetus to persuade Irish politicians to establish funding for other large-scale excavations, partly as a solution to the chronic unemployment situation.¹¹⁷ Joseph Raftery obviously gained much experience by being a supervisor on the Ballinderry excavations, as he directed his own excavations in 1937 at a Bronze Age lake settlement at Knocknalappa, Co. Clare,¹¹⁸ and subsequently the major, multi-period crannog excavations at Rathinaun, Co. Sligo.¹¹⁹ Similarly, archaeological excavations were also carried out about this time by Sean P. Ó Ríordáin and A.T. Lucas of a Late Neolithic lake settlement at Rathjordan, Co. Limerick.¹²⁰ Indeed, the impact of the Harvard expedition and the continuing interest in crannogs can also be seen in the chapter devoted to them in Ó Ríordáin's *Antiquities of the Irish Countryside*, published in 1942.¹²¹

Oliver Davies and crannog excavations in Northern Ireland, 1940-1950

From about 1940, archaeologists in Northern Ireland became active in crannog research. Oliver Davies, an archaeologist in the Classics Department, Queens University Belfast, made a particularly important contribution. He carried out both archaeological survey and excavation of a large number of crannogs across Ulster. In 1940, he began four seasons of excavations at the complex, multi-period crannog at Island MacHugh, Co. Tyrone. This was subsequently published under the auspices of the *Belfast Natural History Society*.¹²²

Oliver Davies carried out extensive archaeological survey during the war years along and across the border with the Republic. Indeed, it is part of the folklore of modern Irish archaeology that his presence there may have had as much to do with his involvement with British Intelligence on the Free State border during WWII.¹²³ After fieldwork for the Irish Tourist Association in the summer of 1941 in Cavan, Leitrim, western Monaghan and south Donegal, he wrote a major regional review of crannogs in south Ulster¹²⁴. This article is important in that it is one of the first to explore the landscape setting of these crannogs. He noted that the distribution of crannogs was not necessarily

¹¹⁷ Joseph Raftery, 'A backward look' in *Arch. Ire.* 2, no. 1, (1988), pp 22-24.

¹¹⁸ Joseph Raftery, 'Knocknalappa crannóg, Co. Clare' in *N. Munster Antiq. Jn.* , 3 (1942), pp 53-72.

¹¹⁹ Joseph Raftery, 'Lake-dwellings in Ireland' in *Scientific Service*, 4, no. 3 (1957), pp 5-15.

¹²⁰ S.P. Ó Ríordáin and A.T. Lucas, 'Excavation of a small crannóg at Rathjordan, Co. Limerick' in *N. Munster Antiq. Jn.* , 5 (1946-1947), pp 68-77.

¹²¹ S.P. Ó Ríordáin, *Antiquities of the Irish countryside* (Cork, first ed., 1942).

¹²² Oliver Davies, *Excavations at Island MacHugh* (Belfast, 1950).

¹²³ This idea is part of the folklore of Irish archaeology, but has never really been substantiated.

¹²⁴ Davies, 'Contributions to the study of crannógs in south Ulster', pp 14-30.

complementary to that of lakes (the Donegal lakes have relatively few) and that the distribution of crannogs and monastic islands were mutually exclusive in their distribution. He reviewed the Mesolithic and Neolithic finds from crannogs, the occasional Bronze Age artefacts from lake islands and the frequency of Medieval castles and tower-houses on rocky lake islands.

Like his contemporaries, Adolf Mahr and Joseph Raftery, Oliver Davies was interested in the formal similarities with Swisslake settlements. He discussed the various types of lake settlement sites, such as crannog-cairns (circular piles of stone retained by a palisade), clay mounds, log-platforms (timber beams laid radially in the manner of Scottish crannogs) and the *Packwerk*-crannog, built of layers of branches, twigs, sand and pegged by piles, but having little other formal structure. The article also reviewed his excavations of a crannog at Hackelty, Co. Cavan. It also contained notes on a Bann flake from Mahanagh, Lough Allen, Co. Leitrim, as well as accounts of unpublished crannog excavations from Co. Cavan, such as Corraneary Lough, Rivory Island, Aghavoher, Killywilly and Deredis Upper. Oliver Davies also excavated a settlement on a natural island at Lough Eske, Co. Donegal.¹²⁵

At Deredis Upper, Co. Cavan, he investigated a number of crannogs on Lough Inchin and Farnham Lough.¹²⁶ On Farnham Lough, he discovered three crannogs, one of which produced a sixteenth-seventeenth century Bellarmine jar, a clay pipe and a rotary quern fragment.¹²⁷ On Lough Inchin, a crannog at the narrow north end of the lake produced only scanty habitation remains, which he compared to the 'small Neolithic crannogs on which Bann flakes may be found; of these several have been identified in the Monaghan-Cavan area'.¹²⁸ He excavated a larger multi-period crannog at the southwest corner of Lough Inchin in 1942. Its earlier phase produced wooden beams, wattle-work, flint, chert and animal bone and some fragments of iron. This may have been an Early Medieval crannog. The later period of occupation was on a platform of stone, wood and clay. The associated finds included eighteenth-century pottery, iron objects and bird and animal bone. This was taken to be the scanty remains of a Post-Medieval settlement site.

The County Down Archaeological Survey and crannog studies in Northern Ireland, 1950-1966

¹²⁵ Oliver Davies, 'Excavations around Lough Eske, Co. Donegal' in *U.J.A.*, 9 (1946), pp 91-100.

¹²⁶ Oliver Davies, 'Excavation of a crannog at Deredis Upper in Lough Inchin, Co. Cavan' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 76 (1946), pp 19-34.

¹²⁷ Davies, 'Deredis Upper', p. 19

The emphasis shifted to County Down in the early 1950s, when several early medieval crannogs, amongst other sites, were excavated in the Barony of Lecale by the Archaeological Survey of Northern Ireland. In 1951 and 1952, Pat Collins excavated an early medieval crannog at Lough Faughan, Co. Down.¹²⁹ The site was explored primarily because of the antiquarian discovery of a 13th century glazed pottery jug on the site leading to the hope that it would produce late medieval occupation evidence.¹³⁰ However, the excavations indicated that the site was mostly early medieval in date, occupied at some unknown period between the seventh and tenth centuries AD.

The crannog was constructed on a purely substructural substratum of hazel, alder, birch brushwood and peat over a marshy deposit. The upper surface of this substructure was covered with woven wattle panels, interpreted as the beginning of the occupation layer. This consisted of brown peaty deposits within which there were several clay hearths surrounded by stone kerbing and associated with spreads of timbers. Some of the hearths were industrial rather than domestic, as iron and bronze slag, crucibles and a clay mould for casting bronze pins were found in them. There were some finds in the substructural levels probably derived from domestic refuse from another settlement transported onto the site. The crannog occupation layer produced iron tools, axes, knives, shears, two bronze pins, bone pins, glass and amber beads, spindle whorls and numerous sherds of plain, cordoned and decorated souterrain ware and some imported Samian ware. There was also some medieval pottery on the site, probably dated to the thirteenth century, while an early thirteenth-century coin was later found on the crannog. Rotary querns and whetstones were used on-site. Animal bone included mostly cattle, with some pig, fish and bird (possibly from a fighting cock). One slightly rectangular platform may have been either occupational or a building platform. A layer of burnt material, containing carbonised oats and barley, covered much of the site suggesting a widespread fire. The site economy was based on mixed farming in the surrounding landscape, with the slaughtering of cattle at a young age probably indicating a preponderance of dairying. However, the site had a largely industrial function, with several hearths and little evidence for house structures.

In June 1956, Pat Collins and Bruce Proudfoot carried out trial excavations on a crannog at Clea Lakes, Co. Down.¹³¹ These excavations were mostly carried out by means of test

¹²⁸ Davies, 'Deredis Upper', p. 19

¹²⁹ Collins, 'Lough Faughan crannog', pp 45-82.

¹³⁰ Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, p. 92.

¹³¹ Collins and Proudfoot, 'Clea Lakes crannóg', pp 92-101.

trenches or small sample areas, and thereby differed from the more extensive Harvard excavations of the 1930s. Nevertheless, much interesting material was produced and these studies were the first to be carried out within a broader research design, in this case, the investigation of historic settlement in south Down. The crannog was situated in a small lake lying in the drumlins to the west of Strangford Lough. It had already been excavated in the nineteenth century, when finds including bronze pins, a stone disc and both early medieval souterrain ware and medieval coarse ware were found. The site was artificially constructed by depositing sub-soil, freshly quarried rock-chips and a thin layer of peat over the natural boulder clay. The occupation layer comprised a three feet thick deposit of rubbish, within which were the footings of a stone building and most of the artefactual finds. This was covered by a brown loam and stone, within which there was a hearth with ash. The uppermost surface of the crannog was enclosed by a stone wall in the manner of a cashel. The artefactual assemblage from the modern excavation was all of early medieval date. It included souterrain ware, two crucibles used for bronze working as indicated by their staining, a bronze fragment, an iron socketed gouge, three bone pins, a glass bead, lignite bracelets, a stone rotary quern, a perforated stone disc, two spindle whorls, a whetstone, thirty-six pieces of flint (including a thumbnail scraper and Mesolithic Larnian flakes), a tracked stone and a stone pebble used as a 'linen polisher'. Although the size and status of the original crannog is unknown, these are finds typical of other sites. It is interesting that bronze working in some scale was being practised on the site.

The ongoing impact of modern drainage works and agricultural developments also lead to other lake settlement investigations in the 1950s. In 1952 Pat Collins and William Seaby investigated an unusual Bronze Age lakeshore settlement complex at Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone.¹³² In the dry summer of 1956, W.H. Hodges also excavated a small lake settlement at Cullyhanna Lough, Co. Armagh (subsequently dated to the Middle Bronze Age).¹³³

Discoveries at Lough Gara in the 1950s

The next discoveries in the republic were also caused by arterial drainage. In 1952, the lake levels of Lough Gara on the Sligo/Roscommon border, were lowered by over two metres by a drainage scheme. An astonishing wealth of archaeology was exposed to view

¹³² A.E.P. Collins and W.A. Seaby, 'Structures and small finds discovered at Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone' in *U.J.A.*, 23 (1960), pp. 25-37.

¹³³ H.W.M. Hodges, 'A hunting camp at Cullyhanna Lough near Newtown Hamilton, Co. Armagh' in *U.J.A.*, 21 (1958), pp 7-13; Jennifer Hillam, 'The dating of Cullyhanna hunting lodge' in *Ir.*

on the lake foreshore¹³⁴ Initially, two archaeological surveys were carried out, the first done by R.E. Cross, chief engineer of Public Works, who published his map of identified 'crannogs'. This was followed by a more detailed survey by Padraig Ó hEailidhe around the mouth of the Boyle River (in Tivannagh, Derrymaquirk and Coolnagranshy townlands especially). There were also large concentrations of sites along the eastern shore of the lake, at Emlagh, Derrymore Island and Ross townlands. Recent archaeological surveys and excavations on Lough Gara by Christina Fredengren's Crannog Research Programme have confirmed that sites can also be located around the western shore of the lake and have also established a much deeper understanding of the archaeology of the lake.¹³⁵

Although the Lough Gara archaeology was not published in detail like the Harvard investigations, it quickly entered the Irish archaeological consciousness, through correspondence and the experience of individual researchers. Joseph Raftery claimed that there were at least 360 individual spreads of stone, large stone cairns, crannogs and wooden post alignments, but it is uncertain now how many of these were of geological origin. Local people and archaeologists gathered large assemblages of finds from the foreshore and up to forty dugouts boats were identified. The finds included early prehistoric stone axes and other lithics, Bronze Age tools, weaponry and ornaments, Iron Age swords, spearheads and spearbutts, early medieval iron axes and high-status metalwork (such as copper-alloy finger rings, belt-buckles and pennanular brooches and ringed-pins).

It seems that most of the crannog sites discovered in the 1950s were small, low flat spreads of stone often reached by narrow causeways. These sites, (typically termed 'metalling sites' because they were made of spreads of small stones) were mostly found on the reedy flats of lower Lough Gara. Cross stated that in every instance, these smaller sites produced 'pre-Bronze Age material', such as Bann flakes, as well as animal bone and charred wood.¹³⁶ The larger crannogs consisted of large cairns of stones with horizontal timbers and encircling palisades, often reached by stone causeways. These larger sites often produced Bronze Age artefacts, and also common were Bann flakes, cores,

Archaeol Research Forum 3, no. 1, (1976), pp 17-20.

¹³⁴ R.E. Cross, 'Lough Gara: a preliminary survey' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 83 (1953), pp 93-6; Anon. 'Crannóg finds at Lough Gara' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 82 (1952), pp 182-3; Raftery 'Lake-dwellings in Ireland', pp 5-15; Joseph Raftery 'Drainage and the Past' in *Oibre*, 4 (1966), pp 11-3.

¹³⁵ Christina Fredengren, 'Lough Gara through time' in *Arch. Ire.* 12, no. 1, (1998), pp 31-3; Christina Fredegren 'Islands as crannogs' in *Aktuell Arkologi*, 6 (1998), pp 125-42; Fredengren, 'Poor people's crannogs', pp 24-5.

¹³⁶ Cross, 'Crannóg finds at Lough Gara', p. 94

hammerstones, stone axes and saddle querns. At Coolnagranshy, Co. Roscommon (on the Boyle River), probable Late Mesolithic Bann flakes, stone axes and hammerstones were taken from an exposed cairn or mound retained by vertical birch piles. At Ross, Co. Sligo (at the southeast corner of the large lake), Late Bronze Age metalwork was gathered from one probable lake settlement site. A fifth to sixth-century copper-alloy finger ring was picked up on 'Crannog 88' at Derrycoagh, Co. Roscommon. Joseph Raftery excavated two crannogs in Lough Gara. Crannog No. 124 at Tivannagh, Co. Roscommon, located at the mouth of the River Boyle, produced archaeological evidence for both prehistoric and Early Medieval occupation.

Crannog 61 at Rathtinaun, Co. Sligo, was totally excavated between 1952 and 1955 revealing a complex, multi-period site dated from the Late Bronze Age to the latter part of the early Middle Ages. It originally appeared as a large cairn or mound, 36m by 29m and 2.5m in height, situated in a sheltered bay on the eastern side of the lake, about 30m from the drylands. Initial discoveries of some Late Bronze Age artefacts on the site indicated a late prehistoric association. The site was totally excavated between 1953 and 1955 by Joseph Raftery. The site had two Late Bronze Age phases of occupation (Period 1 and Period 2), followed by a period of abandonment and concealment by lake sands. The early medieval occupation began with the Period III occupation level, the richest period of activity, probably dating from between AD 600-750. A large mound of stones 11.5m in length was placed on the sands and was retained by a wooden revetment. Peat, logs and stone heaped against and around the sides of this mound which was in turn retained by a timber revetment, increasing the size of the crannog to 28.5m by 21m. A layer of brushwood, gritty yellow sand, flagstones and timber were laid over this at about the same time. A vertical pile palisade, probably built in two phases retained the crannog. There were no recognisable houses, but a large centrally placed hearth was in use over an extended period while a layer of brushwood and peat may have served as a house floor. Finds from the Period III occupation included various stone objects, including two polished stone axes, bronze brooches, pins, rings and an armlet, an iron spearhead, a shield-boss, iron ferrules, iron skillets, a bill-hook and an iron barrel padlock fragment. There were also clay crucibles and bone pins, combs, beads and spindle whorls. Glass pieces included a fragment of a Merovingian glass vessel, greenish-yellow in colour. A layer of sand indicated lake flooding and temporary abandonment of the crannog, which itself had slumped to the south.

The Period IV occupation began with the levelling of the crannog surface by placing grassy turves and stones over the Period III remains, all held in position by a stout

revetment and two rows of squared oak posts running along the eastern side of the crannog. It is interesting to note that the strongest defences faced the land. The latter stages of Period IV produced definite house evidence, in the form of a large round house, 10.5m in diameter. There was a central hearth area and a possible entrance to the east, facing the land. In its final years, the crannog was extended to the southwest. Finds from the Period IV occupation included stone hammerstones, scrapers, flakes and a rotary quern, iron pins, ferrules, knives and a hoard consisting of a rotary quern, an iron horse-bit and a wooden pin. Pins of bone and antler handles were common, as were stave-built and lathe-turned wooden vessels. There was also clay mould fragments for casting copper-alloy rings. Period IV occupation was ended by a lake flood which deposited water-washed sands over the site.

The Period V occupation began with the raising of the level of the Period IV crannog, with a solid deposit of stone heaped over the whole site. This deposit was 1.5m thick, measuring 26 metres north-south and 20.5m east-west forming an oval plan. However, all superficial features had all but disappeared. A small stone setting, 10m in length, may have been the curving arc of a wall, while a tight concentration of fourteen narrow stakes may have formed some structure. A layer of clay and ash could have been a floor. The Period V finds included the usual stone axes, pebbles, scrapers, hones, rotary querns and flint strike-a-lights, a bronze ring-pin and strap, as well as an iron socketed spearhead, shield-boss, knives, nails, sickles, bone pins, combs and spindle whorls. Wooden vessels included stave-built buckets, bases, barrel hoops, carved tubs and a spoon. The Period V crannog was then abandoned for a considerable period, allowing the build-up of a turf layer and natural vegetation across the site, forming a 10-15cm depth of dark soil.

In Period VI, the inhabitants of the local area decided to re-use the old crannog site by extending it with a heap of stones, twigs, peat and grassy sods on the existing mound and beyond the perimeter of its eastern side. It was supported by a double-row revetment of wooden posts along its eastern side, strengthened on its outer side by a layer of sandy and peaty material sloping down to the water's edge. This may have been a palisade, rather than a revetment, the lines of posts ran for about 31m along the side of the site. The western side of the crannog had been largely washed away by wave erosion. Traces of occupation were meagre, apart from artefacts and a layer of ash and clay on the northeast side of the site. Finds included the usual stone objects, as well as bronze decorated discs and ring-pins, and iron socketed spearheads, knives, nails, rings, slag, bone pins, combs (Pl. 36) and wooden artefacts. The final phase of occupation, Period

VII, was scanty and barely traceable. A small area on top of the mound had a thin layer of black soil over it, which was covered by small, angular stones, with an array of stone, bone, bronze and iron artefacts. The full interpretation of the chronology, function and economy of Rathtinaun will await its publication. It is evident that the site was actively used by generations of local people, who re-built it, modified its size and appearance, before abandoning it for periods of time.

Archaeological survey, excavation and changing ideas, 1970-2002

The Fermanagh crannog survey and dendrochronological studies in the 1970s

In 1973, artificially reduced water levels at Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone, exposed the foreshore peats and clays. Fissuring of the lake bed peats threatened the Bronze Age sites recorded there in 1952, so these were re-investigated by a team lead by Brian Williams through the wet and windy months of November and December.¹³⁷

In 1977, Claire Foley carried out a crannog survey in the lakelands of Fermanagh, as part of the ongoing county archaeological survey by the Department of Environment, Northern Ireland. The summers of 1976-1977 in Ireland were amongst the hottest and driest in living memory and lake levels were considerably lower than usual. Many previously identified crannogs became visible after many years of submergence, including some of the sites (e.g. Ballydoolough) originally described by William Wakeman. Claire Foley and an assistant, using a small rubber dinghy and oars, visited at least 120 sites through the long, hot summer of 1977. Although there was no attempt at underwater survey, it was possible to gently float around sites and identify piles and wooden structures lying in the shallow water. The crannogs were found to be mostly in the small lakes in the vicinity of upper and lower Lough Erne and in the drumlin lakes to the south of the county.

The crannogs avoided the large lakes with their open stretches of water, but were typically found in small isolated lakes drained by unnavigable streams in the vicinity of upper and lower Lough Erne and in the drumlin lakes to the south of the county.. If the lakes were small, the crannogs were found to be centrally placed, thus making them as inaccessible as possible. In larger lakes such as Lough MacNean, they were closer to the shore, often found in sheltered bays and inlets. Crannogs were found in clusters in six lakes. The Fermanagh crannogs ranged in diameter from 8m to 34m and typically stood from the water level to 3m height above its surface. Horizontal and vertical timbers were

commonly found, along with stony layers. Early medieval and post-medieval finds from Fermanagh crannogs (during nineteenth-century investigations and the crannog survey) included fragments of rotary querns and crannog ware pottery, iron slag, crucible and mould fragments, bronze pins, jet bracelets and beads, iron tools and weapons. Some crannogs were dated to between the ninth and the eleventh centuries AD, while sixteen radiocarbon dates from the fifteenth to the seventeenth centuries were also obtained, supporting the model of extensive Post-Medieval crannog activities in Fermanagh.

At the same time, Michael Baillie at the Palaeoecology Centre at Queens University, Belfast was taking dendrochronological samples from oak timbers from numerous archaeological structures, including many crannogs, in an attempt to establish a long oak chronology for Ireland.¹³⁸ Several northern crannogs proved to have construction dates between the late sixth and early seventh centuries AD, suggesting that a particularly intensive phase of crannog construction in Ireland. A second important discovery was the number of Fermanagh crannogs that produced firm dating evidence in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries AD.

Re-thinking old sites and the Wood-Martin crannog conference, 1986

The early 1980s saw a renewal of interest in crannog archaeology in Ireland, leading to survey and excavation projects, a number of important publications and a crannog conference in Dublin. In 1983 Beaver Press and Dublin University Press printed a facsimile of Wood-Martin's *The Lake dwellings of Ireland*, making this seminal text available to more than just bibliophiles and university students.

There were also a number of important papers published in the *Journal of Irish Archaeology*. Chris Lynn produced a highly influential critique of the supposed early dating of Irish crannogs. He distinguished Bronze Age and suspected Iron Age lake settlements from the classic early medieval crannog.¹³⁹ Lagore crannog became again the focus of interest after a seminar on the site in the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland in December 1984, chaired by Frank Mitchell. Two papers emerged immediately from that seminar. Chris Lynn re-interpreted the structure and stratigraphy of Lagore

¹³⁷ B.B. Williams, 'Excavations at Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone' in *U.J.A.*, 41 (1978), pp 37-48.

¹³⁸ M.G.L. Baillie, 'An interim statement on dendrochronology at Belfast' in *U.J.A.*, 42 (1979), pp 72-84; M.G.L. Baillie, *Tree ring dating and archaeology* (London, 1982); M.G.L. Baillie, 'Irish dendrochronology and radiocarbon calibration' in *U.J.A.*, 4 (1985), pp 11-23; M.G.L. Baillie, *A slice through time: dendrochronology and precision dating* (London, 1995).

¹³⁹ Lynn, 'Some 'early' ring-forts and crannógs', pp 47-58.

and Ballinderry 1 crannogs¹⁴⁰, while Richard Warner re-assessed the dating of Lagore¹⁴¹. A number of survey and excavation projects started in the early 1980s. They included Victor Buckley archaeological surveys of the crannogs of Westmeath, Cavan, Louth and Monaghan, John Bradley's excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, Cormac Bourke's excavations at Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath, and the work of the Crannog Archaeological Project on Lough Ennell. The crannog of Island MacHugh was also briefly re-excavated by Richard Ivens and Derek Simpson in 1985 and 1986.¹⁴²

This renewed archaeological interest set the stage for an Irish crannog conference commemorating the centenary of the publication of William Wood-Martin's *The lake dwellings of Ireland*. The conference, organised by Victor Buckley, was held in December 1986 in Trinity College. It was the first time that the results of modern archaeological surveys, excavations, finds studies, scientific dating techniques and historical studies were brought together through the presentation of eighteen papers in one forum.¹⁴³

Victor Buckley presented a history of crannog research since Wood-Martin's work in 1886. Aideen Ireland gave a biography of William Wood-Martin's life and work. Séamus Caulfield reviewed the impact of the Harvard Archaeological Expedition on Irish archaeology, in particular illustrating the circular arguments in the dating of Ballinderry crannog No. 1, Ballinderry crannog No. 2 and Lagore. He asserted that the historical documentation could no longer be judged as a reliable source. Joseph Raftery reviewed his work at Lough Gara. Brian Williams outlined the results of the Fermanagh crannog survey. Michael Gibbons, then of the Sites and Monuments Record office, presented new evidence from Connemara, not for wooden palisaded crannogs, but stone duns and 'watercashels'. Excavation summaries were provided from the tenth to thirteenth-century AD crannog at Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath (by Cormac Bourke) and the Island MacHugh crannog excavations, where ninth-century BC and seventh-century AD evidence was revealed (by Richard Ivens and Derek Simpson). John Bradley described the evidence for metalworking at the early medieval crannog at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, exploring its spatial distribution across the site. Ian Morrison reviewed Scottish

¹⁴⁰ C.J. Lynn, 'Lagore, County Meath and Ballinderry No. 1, County Westmeath crannogs: some possible structural reinterpretations' in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 3 (1985-86), pp 69-73.

¹⁴¹ R.B. Warner, 'The date of the start of Lagore' in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 3 (1985-1986), pp 75-7; Briggs, 'A historiography of Irish crannogs', also derived from this seminar.

¹⁴² R.J. Ivens, D.D.A. Simpson and D. Brown, 'Excavations at Island MacHugh 1985 - interim report' in *U.J.A.*, 49 (1986), pp 99-103.

¹⁴³ John Bradley, 'Conference: Irish crannogs 1986' in *NewsWARP*, 2 (1987), pp 23-4.

crannog research. Richard Warner examined the complexity of the relationships between royalty and crannogs in early Ireland. Raymond Gillespie reviewed the previously little known historical evidence for the use of crannogs in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries AD. He suggested that crannogs were mainly fortified strongholds, but that they were occasionally used as places to store munitions, prisons, storehouses for wealth, places for refuge and as hospitals. Michael Baillie reviewed the evidence of dendrochronology, which suggested to him that the construction of crannogs was mostly based in the late sixth and early seventh-centuries AD. The animal bone evidence from Moynagh Lough was discussed by Finbar McCormick. Ragnaill Ó Floinn suggested that crannog ware was a response to thirteenth-century market forces. There were two further papers on the interaction of archaeology with the public. Etienne Rynne described the construction of the replica crannog at Craggaunowen and Robert Farrell spoke about the importance of involving sports divers in crannog investigations. John Bradley suggested that four main points emerged from the conference.¹⁴⁴ Firstly, there was the necessity of refining the term 'crannog'. Secondly, there was a need to compile an inventory of different crannog types. Thirdly, it was now thought necessary to excavate crannogs of all periods, but particularly prehistoric and later medieval sites. Finally, the importance of work in western Ireland was stressed, where crannog features differ greatly from those in the midlands and east.

Treasure hunters and the State, 1980-1987

In years to come, archaeologists may well see the early years of the 1980s as the period of most intense activity on Irish lake settlements since the late nineteenth century. This was the period when amateur treasure hunters with metal detectors explored archaeological sites throughout the Irish landscape.¹⁴⁵ Metal detectors had been used in Ireland since the 1970s, but the discovery of a hoard of early medieval metalwork at Derrynaflan, Co. Tipperary led to a surge in their popularity after 1980.

By the early 1980s, divers and other interested parties using metal detectors were regularly searching crannogs. Intriguingly, many divers and treasure hunters began to recognise significant patterns in the settlement landscape, so that only the richest sites (not all of them obvious) were being chosen by them for investigation.

¹⁴⁴ Bradley 'Conference: Irish crannogs 1986', p. 24.

¹⁴⁵ E.P. Kelly, 'Treasure-hunting in Ireland - its rise and fall' in *Antiquity*, 67 (1993), pp 378-81; E.P. Kelly, 'Investigation of ancient fords on the River Suck' in *Inland Waterways*, 20, no. 1 (1993), pp 4-5; E.P. Kelly 'Protecting Ireland's archaeological heritage' in *International Journal of Cultural*



Fig. 2.8a Early medieval crannog at Tonymore crannog, Lough Kinale, Co. Longford. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

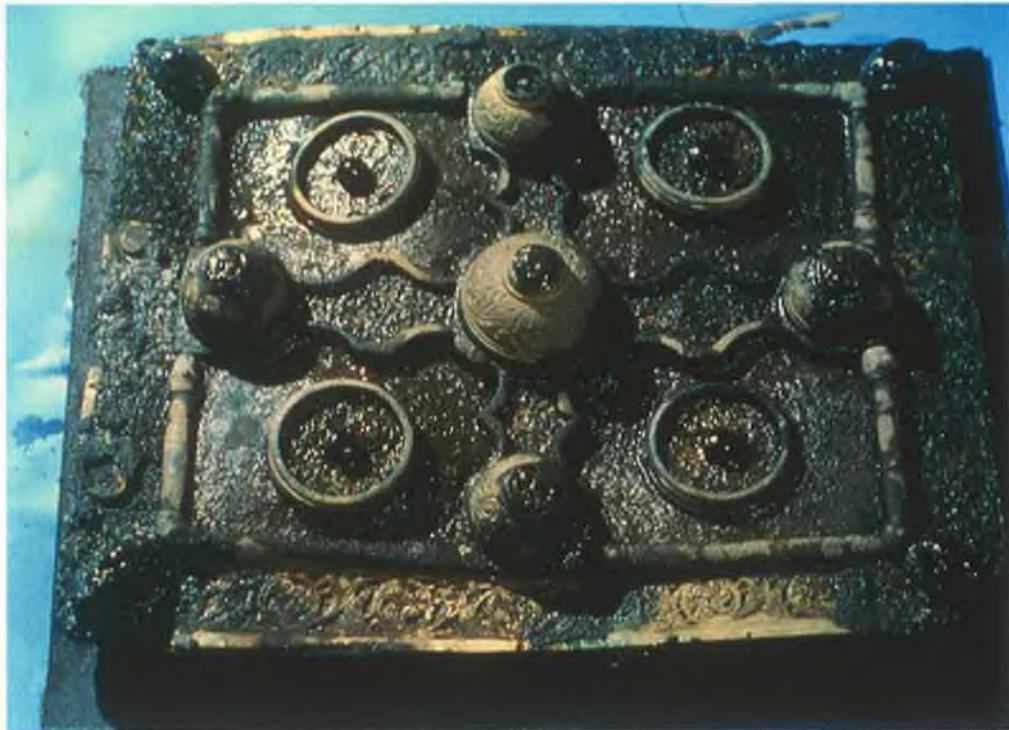


Fig. 2.8b Reconstructed eighth-century bookshrine found by treasure hunters beside Tonymore crannog, Lough Kinale, Co. Longford in 1980s. In these years the century-old tradition of collecting antiquities from crannogs came up against the growing legislative power of state archaeologists. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

Indeed, the discoveries of the treasure hunters indicated that it was possible for experienced fieldworkers to trace social hierarchies and site functions in the Irish early medieval settlement landscape. They made a range of spectacular archaeological discoveries (such as an early medieval bookshrine at Lough Kinale, Co. Longford and processional cross at Tully Lough, Co. Roscommon) but it is apparent that many other objects were sent out of the country through illegal exporting and an illicit antiquities trade. In summer 1986 an underwater diver searching near a crannog in Lough Kinale, Co. Longford, picked up several fragments of a large eighth-century AD bookshrine in two metres of water (Fig. 2.8a; Fig. 2.8b). A three-week season of survey was carried out by the National Museum of Ireland on this crannog in 1987.¹⁴⁶

By July 1987, the enactment of the *National Monuments (Amendment) Act* made it illegal to search for archaeological objects, using metal detectors, magnetometers or other electronic detecting devices, without a licence. Police powers were included in the act which would enable police to conduct searches, under warrant, for looted antiquities. Since then the main phase of the metal detecting era seems to have ended, although it is undoubtedly still going on. Through a process of both co-operation and occasional legal action, the National Museum has now taken thousands of these archaeological objects into the care of the state and many collectors have provided vital information on the provenances of these artefacts.

It is worth pointing out that not all treasure hunters were solely motivated by the prospect of monetary reward, for many it had as much to do with a personal sense of discovery, as to do with the obtaining and owning objects from the distant past. On the other hand, harm was certainly done to many archaeological sites. Metal detector surveys were carried out on literally hundreds, and more probably thousands, of Irish archaeological sites. It is clear that crannogs bore the brunt and many must have been damaged by illegal digging and the removal of important artefacts from their contexts.

The Crannog Archaeological Project, 1983-1993

Since the 1960s, local diving groups (The Mullingar sub-aqua club, for example) had been diving in Ireland's lakes, occasionally finding dugout canoes and other finds.

¹⁴⁶ E.P. Kelly, 'The Lough Kinale book-shrine' In R. M. Spearman and J. Higgitt (eds.), *The age of migrating ideas: Early Medieval art in northern Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1993), pp 168-74; R. Farrell, E.P. Kelly and M. Gowan, 'The crannóg archaeological project (CAP), Republic of Ireland I: a pre-preliminary report', *I.J.N.A.U.E.* 18, no. 2 (1989), pp 123-36.



Fig. 2.9 Aerial photograph of early medieval Cróinis crannog and Dún na Sciath ringfort, on the southwest shore of Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. This lake was the main location of the Crannog Archaeological Survey's still largely unpublished underwater surveys, between 1983 and 1993 (CUCAP AVH 20).

With the growing use of metal detectors, many of these divers became adept at exploring crannogs. Some of them (notably Donal Boland, later to be director of the first Irish underwater archaeological company) joined with the National Museum to begin underwater surveys in the midlands lakes in 1983.

This led to the establishment of the Crannog Archaeological Project, carried out by a team of American archaeologists lead by Robert Farrell from Cornell University, in tandem with Eamonn P. Kelly and Michael Ryan from the National Museum of Ireland and Victor Buckley from the Archaeological Survey of Ireland.¹⁴⁷ In 1983, the Crannog Archaeological Project was formed. Its broad aim was to encourage amateur divers to become involved in systematic, professional archaeological projects. It started out with a brief survey of sites in Lough Ennell (Fig. 2.9) and Lough Annalla, Co. Westmeath.

¹⁴⁷ Robert Farrell, 'The crannóg survey project: the lakes of the west midlands in', *Arch. Ire.*, 4, no. 1, (1990), pp 27-9; Robert Farrell, 'Crannog archaeology project' in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1989* (Dublin, 1990), p. 56.

Wooden structures were located underwater at the crannog of Cróinis.¹⁴⁸ The survey continued in Lough Oughter, Co. Cavan, Lough Kinale, Co. Longford, Lough Ennell and Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath, with the help of Eamonn Kelly and Nessa O'Connor from the National Museum of Ireland. Underwater survey in Lough Lene led to the discovery of wooden structures at Castle Island.¹⁴⁹

Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath gradually became the focus of all the surveys. There is certainly evidence for prehistoric activity around Lough Ennell. Several small, heavily concreted, cairns of stone measuring 10-12m in diameter at Inchacrone, Wren Point and Goose Island, as well as similar stone cairns, platforms and jetties located underwater around several crannogs along the eastern shore may be prehistoric in date. Both archaeological and historical evidence suggests that between the ninth and twelfth centuries AD, the lake was the focus of a significant political territory around the lake. Historical references suggest that several of the ringforts and crannogs were used as royal sites or high-status settlements, while the monastic sites (at Dysart, Lynn) acted as elements in this lake settlement system as well. It is suggested that in the eighth or ninth century, the Clann Cholmáin kings of the southern Uí Néill, moved their base from the Hill of Uisneach to Lough Ennell. It was of course some miles, but Lough Ennell was certainly more strategically placed. It is on the River Brosna/River Inny drainage, which leads to the River Shannon and lies north of the major dryland routeways of the *Slige Mór*.

Cróinis, the best known crannog in Lough Ennell is historically attested as the royal residence of Máelsechlainn II, of the Clann Cholmáin of the southern Uí Néill dynasty. The crannog lies on the south-west shore and Dún na Sciath, a multivallate ringfort also historically identified as a royal seat of the Clann Cholmáin, is located on the neighbouring dryland.¹⁵⁰ Cróinis was briefly excavated by R.A.S Macalister in 1938, who discovered a large stone structure, a boat slipway, a stone pavement and a pit associated with an ash spread.¹⁵¹ The Crannog Archaeological Project's investigations in the vicinity of the site revealed two to three concentric rows of roundwood partly enclosing

¹⁴⁸ Robert Farrell and Victor Buckley, 'Preliminary examination of the potential of offshore and underwater sites in Loughs Ennell and Analla, Co. Westmeath, Ireland', *I.J.N.A.U.E.* 13, no. 4, (1984), pp 281-5.

¹⁴⁹ Robert Farrell, 'The crannog archaeological project (CAP), Republic of Ireland II: Lough Lene - offshore island survey' *I.J.N.A.U.E.*, 18, no. 3, (1989), pp 221-8.

¹⁵⁰ Kelly, 'Observations on Irish lake-dwellings', pp 81-98; Kelly, 'Crannógs', pp 120-3; Warner, 'On crannógs and kings', pp 61-9.

¹⁵¹ R.A.S. Macalister, 'On an excavation conducted at Cro-Inis, Loch Ennell' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 44c (1938), pp 248-51.

the site, dated to *c.* AD 850 and a plank palisade dendrochronologically dated to *c.* AD 1100-1125. Eleventh to twelfth-century bronze pins were also found in the muds.¹⁵² It has been suggested that the site was first constructed in the ninth century, re-fortified in the twelfth and a tower-house built on the island in the fifteenth century. Three Viking-Age silver hoards have been recovered on Dysart Island and a hoard of three silver ingots was recovered from a 'submerged crannog' at Dysart.¹⁵³

An early medieval crannog at Goose Island crannog, on the eastern shore of Lough Ennell, was also investigated. It is built up of boulders and smaller stones with an encircling roundwood palisade, open towards the mainland. Timbers provided radiocarbon dates between the late-ninth and mid-tenth centuries AD.¹⁵⁴ Some form of medieval stone building or tower-house may have stood on the island, as worked stone is presently scattered around its surface. Two ringforts which command good views of the crannog and its neighbouring stone platforms are situated on the adjacent dryland in Belvedere.

An early medieval stone cashel, of spectacular dimensions and intriguing design, is also located on Cherry Island (an enhanced natural island), situated at the southern end of Carrick Bay on the south-eastern shore of the lough. The island may be *Inis na Cairrge*, which is linked in historical references to *Dún na Cairrge*, a stronghold or fort on the shore of Carrick Bay. Both sites were known to have been residences of the kings of Fir Tulach. Viking Age silver has been found on Cherry Island and a Viking-Age silver hoard was found on the dryland at Carrick.

There are also early medieval crannogs at Rushy Island and School Boy Island, at the mouth of the River Brosna at the north end of the lake. Archaeological surveys in this area have also indicated similar associations between settlements on the dryland and the lake archaeology. At Rushy Island, a possible crannog now set in marshy ground has produced Viking-Age silver and a possible bone midden. Two crannogs, two islands, two underwater cairns, a few stone platforms and one partially submerged platform have been recorded in the vicinity of School Boy Island, while it is known that two Viking Age ecclesiastical handbells were found in the water off School Boy island. It has been

¹⁵² Farrell and Buckley, 'Preliminary examination of...Loughs Ennell and Analla', pp 281-5.

¹⁵³ M. Ryan, R. Ó Floinn, N. Lowick, M. Kenny and P. Cazalet, 'Six silver finds of the Viking period from the vicinity of Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath' in *Peritia*, 3 (1984), pp 334-81.

¹⁵⁴ Farrell, Robert, 'The Crannog Archaeological Project (CAP). Archaeological field research in the lakes of the west midlands of Ireland' in C. Karkov and R. Farrell (eds.) *Studies in insular art and archaeology*. American early medieval studies 1, (Cornell, 1991), pp 99-110, at. 104.

suggested that Rushy Island and School Boy Island were defensive sites at the outlet of the River Brosna and that there were links between these crannogs and the early monastery of Lynn that is situated at the northeast corner of the lake. Lynn was certainly an important monastic and economic centre in the region, as claimed by the twelfth-century hagiography of its founder Colmáin Maic Lúachain.

The Crannog Archaeological Project was important in that it effectively introduced systematic underwater surveys to Irish archaeology. As the project was primarily focused on survey, only two small-scale excavations were carried out, one of them a stone cairn on the lake foreshore at Robinstown.¹⁵⁵ Because of this, the chronology and function of most of the Lough Ennell sites remain poorly understood, although all dating evidence suggests activity in the early Middle Ages.

The Archaeological Survey of Ireland 1980-2002

The Office of Public Works began archaeological surveys of sites and monuments in the 1960s, but in these early stages crannogs were not included. In 1980, an archaeologist Victor Buckley was employed to remedy this situation. A boat and lifejackets were obtained and a team of four archaeologists and surveyors started to record the crannogs of Westmeath, Louth, Meath, and Monaghan. The results of these crannog surveys subsequently appeared as numerous site descriptions in the county inventories for Cavan,¹⁵⁶ Meath,¹⁵⁷ Monaghan¹⁵⁸ and the county survey of Louth.¹⁵⁹ The Sites and Monuments Record (SMR) under the direction of Michael Gibbons and Geraldine Stout carried out paper surveys for other counties, and the completion of these and others in the current Record of Monuments and Places (RMP) provide the basis for virtually all current archaeological activity. They have been amongst the most influential pieces of work carried out and have transformed our knowledge of the archaeology of Ireland. The paper surveys included archival and journal reviews, artefact research, detailed cartographic research and a programme of air photograph analysis. The sites recorded from these sources included large numbers of potential lake settlement sites (including crannogs, monastic islands, island cashels, castles, tower-houses and lake promontory forts).

¹⁵⁵ Niall Brady, 'Report on the excavation of a stone platform in Robinstown, Co. Westmeath', (Unpublished report for OPW, (Dublin, 1994)

¹⁵⁶ O'Donovan, *Cavan*.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Moore, *Archaeological Inventory of County Meath* (Dublin, 1987).

¹⁵⁸ Brindley, *Monaghan*.

¹⁵⁹ V.M. Buckley and P.D. Sweetman *Archaeological Survey of County Louth* (Dublin, 1991)

The records of the National Monuments Service, Dúchas – the Heritage Service and the Environment and Heritage Service now indicate that there are at least 1045 *known* ‘crannogs’ in the republic and about 200 crannogs in the north.¹⁶⁰ There is little or no evidence for the date of the vast majority of these sites, but they undoubtedly date from early prehistory to the post-medieval period. Indeed, as this figure is based on paper surveys, not all of them are confirmed archaeological monuments. Many may be natural islands. They are mainly distributed in the midlands and the north and west of the country. Particular concentrations are found in the lakes of the upper River Shannon drainage, upper and lower Lough Erne, Co. Fermanagh and on Lough Corrib, Co. Galway. The smaller lakes of the drumlin belt across Cavan and Monaghan also have high numbers of crannogs. Crannogs are also known in west Galway and Donegal where they have been mainly found to be constructed of stone.

The Moynagh Lough crannog excavations, 1980-2002

The major crannog excavation of recent years has been the sustained campaign at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. The crannog was first identified in the 19th century, and briefly described by William G. Wood-Martin.¹⁶¹ Since its re-discovery in the 1880s, it has continued to be the subject of sustained archaeological excavations by John Bradley.¹⁶² The site has produced material dating to the Late Mesolithic, Neolithic, Early, Middle and Late Bronze Age and early Middle Ages. In the early medieval period, there were several phases of occupation from the late sixth to the ninth century AD, with a sequence of palisades, circular houses and evidence for on-site metalworking, the trade of exotic goods, diet and economy.¹⁶³ Historical research suggests that Moynagh Lough may be identified as the place known as *Loch Dé Mundeach* and that its crannog may well have been a royal or lordly site of the Mugdorne.¹⁶⁴

¹⁶⁰ V.M. Buckley, ‘The National Archive as a research tool’, *IAPA Newsletter* 23 (1996), p. 8.

¹⁶¹ Wood-Martin, *Pagan Ireland*, pp 225-8.

¹⁶² The site has been the subject of several interim reports. See John Bradley, ‘Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1980-81: interim report’ in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 7, no. 2, (1982-1983), pp 12-32; J. Bradley, ‘Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1982-83: interim report’ in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 7, no. 3 (1984), pp 86-93; J. Bradley ‘Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1984: a summary report’ in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 7, no. 4 (1985-1986), pp 79-82; J. Bradley, ‘Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, 1985 and 1987’ in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 8, no. 3, (1990-1991), pp 21-35; J. Bradley, ‘Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath’ in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 9, no. 1, (1994-1995), pp 158-69; J. Bradley, ‘Archaeological excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1995-96’ in *Ríocht na Midhe* 9, no. 3 (1997), pp 50-61. The eighth-century levels are also described in detail in an unpublished archive report, J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1980-1984*, Unpublished site archive report (Dublin, 1984).

¹⁶³ The key interpretative articles are, Bradley, ‘Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath’ (1991), pp 5-26; Bradley, ‘Moynagh Lough: an insular workshop’, pp 74-81.

¹⁶⁴ Edel Bhreathnach, ‘Topographical note: Moynagh Lough, Nobber, Co. Meath’ in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 9, no. 4, (1998), pp 16-9.

There were at least five phases of occupation in the early medieval period, each marked by a re-deposited layer of peat and possibly representing a generation of activity. The crannog varied in form through these five phases of occupation, but in general terms it measured 40m east-west and 32m north-south. The sub-structure consisted of stones, gravelly earth, timbers, brushwood and redeposited peat. Piles were driven into the ground both outside the crannog (to a distance of 10m out from the western side) and within to retain the foundation layers.

The earliest phase, denoted Phase V, is represented by a group of refuse layers, but no structures are yet reported. Finds included a rim-shoulder of E-ware, a bronze disc-pendant pin, a bronze pennanular brooch with birds head terminals, bone combs, glass beads and a leather shoe. The phase is now interpreted as dating to the late sixth to early seventh century AD. The next known phase in the early medieval period, denoted Phase W (from the late seventh to early eighth centuries AD), witnessed the use of a pit, a hearth, a furnace and the deposition of refuse layers outside the crannog. A layer of gravel was spread over the pit and a stone-lined rectangular hearth was built upon it. The hearth was surrounded by post-holes, probably from a spit with a pit to one side. A small, circular wooden house, possibly a work-shop or store no more than 3m in diameter, is also reported from these early phases. E-ware, an iron shield-boss and a bronze mount were found near this structure. Other structures include a wooden trackway. Two Merovingian glass vessels and a bronze spatula were found under gravel in this phase. Other finds from Phase W included a pennanular brooch, gold filigree and a separate-bladed shovel.

In the next phase, Phase X (c. AD 720-748), a basal layer of re-deposited peat was laid on the site and a roundhouse was located between two metalworking areas. The house was circular and double-walled and measured about 7.5m in diameter. A timber pathway lead in from an entrance to the northeast, one re-used timber providing a dendrochronological date of AD 625. Metalworking Area 1 was situated between the house and the entrance. Metalworking Area 2 was larger and was found to the west of the house. It produced four major features, a furnace, a stone-lined area of clay, a spread of compacted pebbles and a dump of metalworking debris. There was also a cesspit, recut on two occasions, which produced layers of dung interspersed with layers of straw and leaves. Finds from this phase included sheet metal beating tools, crucible fragments, heating tray fragments, hundreds of fragments of two-piece clay moulds and motif-pieces. The moulds were used for the production of brooches, mounts, studs and other decorated objects. Ingots were introduced onto the site, placed in crucibles, melted in the

furnace and poured into the moulds. The furnace was used on at least eight occasions. The moulds may have been cooled nearby on the pebbled area, post-casting work and mould making may have been carried out on a pink clay and cobbled spread. The spatial organisation of the metalworkers' areas can thus be recognised.

In Phase Y, (*c.* 748 - *c.*780) there were two roundhouses, a large oak palisade and a furnace-pit, with finds including crucibles, a clay mould, clay nozzles and a bronze ingot. The palisade was of hewn and cleft oak tightly placed together in a U-shaped trench. The palisade construction dates to AD 748 and therefore comes at least 150 years after the first occupation of the site. The palisade revets a layer of redeposited peat upon which the houses were constructed. The largest house (Roundhouse 1) was a substantial circular structure, 11.2m in external diameter (10m internal diameter) with double walls and a laid foundation of reddish-brown gravel. There were at least 250 internal posts, probably deriving from internal partitions, beds and benches. There were several phases of hearths, and twenty spreads of ash and animal bone were scattered through the occupation layer, which measured 12cm in thickness. Substantial hearths of stone-lined rectangular form were constructed and the spreads of animal bone were usually in the vicinity of these hearths. The second house was smaller, approximately 5.2m in diameter and it also had a stone-lined hearth, but the occupation layer was less apparent. There was a bowl-shaped furnace to the west of the house, lined with lake marls. Finds from the large roundhouse included iron knives, key handles, a spearhead, stone hones, iron nails and spindle whorls, bronze pins, bronze finger-rings, bone combs, glass beads, jet bracelet fragments, gaming pieces and flint strike-a-lights. Finds associated with the furnace included three complete crucibles, fifty crucible sherds, three heating trays, a clay mould fragment, baked clay nozzles and a bronze ingot. Many of the crucibles bore evidence of being held by an iron tongs.

Phase Z, the uppermost surviving layers of occupation, had been greatly disturbed by modern bulldozing during attempted land reclamation. There were the remains of a palisade, a foundation layer of re-deposited peat and a single charcoal spread. The palisade was constructed of young oak roundwood trunks. These posts probably had wattles woven around them where they stood above the ground. The crannog would have been 36-40m across. Finds from this layer included three tanged iron knives, two complete crucibles and sherds of others, part of a rotary quernstone, a bone comb fragment, a glass bead, a chunk of amber and four jet bracelet fragments. The phase probably dates to *c.* AD 780 - 810.

Moynagh Lough is both a well-preserved multi-period archaeological site and a remarkable example of an early medieval Irish crannog. Its long-term excavation has revealed several important things about settlement continuity, domestic and industrial activities and the status and lives of its inhabitants. The crannog was apparently occupied continuously between c. AD 600 - 810, a period of some two hundred years. Although there may have been short phases of abandonment, it seems that every generation or so, the entire crannog was reconstructed and ever larger houses placed upon it. The site seems to have been used both for domestic occupation and for various metalworking practices. The presence of furnaces, copper-ingo ts, crucibles, heating trays and baked clay nozzles strongly indicates on-site metal production (melting bronze and smelting copper and tin) and the numerous clay mould fragments indicate that a wide range of bronze artefacts were actually being made at Moynagh Lough. Amber, gold wire and enamel found on the site indicate the production of fine jewellery. There was also some iron working on the site since slag, a furnace base and hydrated ferric oxide were found within the large house. Other crafts practice d on-site include the working of wood, leather, bone and antler, while there may also have been glass working, as glass rods, a vitrified glass bracelet and an unfinished glass bead are known. The crannog dwellers obtained several other fine items through long-distance trade networks, such as the Merovingian glass vessels, jet bracelets, amber and tin.

The Discovery Programme and 'The lake settlement project', 1997-

The Discovery Programme is the Irish state-funded archaeological research institute, established in 1992 by then Taoiseach Charles Haughey with a brief to explore Ireland's past and to communicate the results of this research to both academic and popular audiences. In its initial phase of research, the Discovery Programme concentrated on Ireland's 'dark ages', the period of the Late Bronze Age and Iron Age, with landscape projects in north Munster, excavations at Dún Aonghusa, Aran Islands and Chancellorsland, Co. Tipperary and a geophysical and historical study of the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath. In 1997, the Discovery Programme directorate and council decided to embark on a second phase of research projects, namely investigations of lake settlement archaeology and the archaeology of medieval rural settlement in Ireland. To that end, it was decided to appoint two archaeologists to write two feasibility studies of the potential for such research projects. In 1998, these were published as monographs and the Discovery Programme decided to proceed with both research projects, appointing those two authors as directors to the projects.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶⁵ The two feasibility studies were K.D. 'Conor, *The archaeology of medieval rural settlement in*

Both books were written with specific aims and objectives in mind. Eogan stated that *The archaeology of lake settlement in Ireland* aimed to provide an 'authoritative and substantive review of the current state of knowledge' along with a history of lake settlement studies, the identification of themes for study, an outline of methodologies for future research and to provide a 'series of projects operating at different scales and resources'.¹⁶⁶ It is important to note that these monographs were intended to be the *beginnings* of research, rather than a *result* or end-product of it, so they were both deliberately written as summaries of previous work, presented in a speculative and questioning style.

Nonetheless, the lake settlement monograph provided essentially the first overview of the subject since Wood-Martin's *Lake dwellings*, written over 110 years before. It described the history of lake dwelling and crannog research in Ireland, moving from the earliest antiquarian discoveries, to the syntheses of Wood-Martin and Wakeman, on to the excavations of the Harvard Archaeological Mission, the work of Raftery at Lough Gara, the archaeological surveys and excavations in Northern Ireland and the Republic, as well as the work of the Crannog Archaeological Project on Lough Ennell in the 1980s and 1990s. It could be argued that this historical overview presents a simple chronology of discoveries, rather than a contextual or critical historiographical study of the subject as presented in this study.

Most of the book was devoted to a review of the current state of knowledge of lake settlement archaeology from the Mesolithic to the post-medieval period. In terms of Mesolithic lakeshore archaeology, it showed that there was extensive archaeological evidence for hunter-gatherer activity on lakeshores, particularly in the midlands and northwest at Lough Boora, Lough Kinale, Lough Derravarragh and Lough Gara. Based on original research in the National Museum of Ireland files and archives, the book also argued that this included largely forgotten mounds of clay, gravel and stone on Lough Kinale, upon which there were vertical wooden posts and extensive spreads of Late Mesolithic Bann flakes, cores and stone axes. Bradley's excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath were also producing similar evidence at the time, suggesting that here was an overlooked archaeological phenomenon that required explanation in both social and

Ireland (Dublin, 1998) and Aidan O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement in Ireland* (Dublin, 1998). Both authors were appointed to direct each of the ensuing research projects, although as both were subsequently then appointed to lectureships in archaeology at NUI Galway and University College, Dublin in 2000, they were replaced by Dr. Niall Brady and Dr. Eoin Grogan.

economic terms. The book also described the limited evidence for Neolithic lakeshore habitation, suggesting that this represented a hiatus or shift in activity away from lacustrine wetlands in Ireland. Bronze Age lake dwellings described included sites at Clonfinlough, Ballinderry No. 2, Lough Eskragh, Moynagh Lough amongst others. It was suggested that these were wetland settlements of Bronze Age communities, who were also engaged in symbolic and ritual activities, with the deposition of metalwork and human remains in the wetlands. It was also shown that there was a distinct lack of evidence for Iron Age lake-dwellings, but suggested that hints of activity represented by metalwork finds suggested that this might be forthcoming. In the early medieval section, summaries were provided of regional crannog surveys (e.g. in Fermanagh and on Lough Ennell) as well as key site excavations such as those at Lagore, Moynagh Lough, Ballinderry No. 1, Ballinderry No. 2, Craigywarren. The interpretation of this evidence was limited to high-status sites, but there were brief overviews of use of early medieval crannogs as royal or lordly sites, as defensive refuges, craft centres and agricultural settlements. The book also summarised (for the first time) the archaeological and historical evidence for crannog occupation and use in the late medieval period and in the post-medieval period (i.e. in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in particular). Subsequent chapters provided an outline of research questions, as well as a review of multidisciplinary approaches and concluded by arguing the future projects needed to be multi-period landscape projects aimed at exploring long term social and environmental change in lakelands.

Since the publication of the monograph, the Discovery Programme has now embarked on multi-disciplinary landscape research project (initially established by Dr. Eoin Grogan, and since directed by Dr. Christina Fredengren).¹⁶⁷ This project has initially focused on the Lough Kinale, Co. Longford region and the first palaeoenvironmental and archaeological results reveal intensive activity on the lakeshore in the Late Mesolithic, and on the lake's crannogs in the early medieval period (between the seventh and the eleventh century), with ongoing re-use and re-activation of the sites in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries AD. An innovative programme of research has also been carried out on the perception and use in modern folklore.

The Lough Gara 'Crannog Research Programme'

As the Discovery Programme was embarking on its own research, the single most ambitious and sustained programme of investigations of crannogs was being completed

¹⁶⁶ George Eogan, 'Preface' in O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, p xiv.

by Fredengren's Crannog Research Programme on Lough Gara, Co. Sligo and Roscommon (where previous surveys by Cross, Raftery and others had revealed a rich archaeological landscape).¹⁶⁸ This project was carried out as a PhD within the University of Stockholm and involved five years of archaeological survey and excavations, funded by Swedish institutions, the Royal Irish Academy and the National Monuments Section, Dúchas – the Heritage Service (who supported the excavations of a crannog at Sroove) and the Heritage Council (who funded an extensive radiocarbon dating programme). Although focused on this region in the northwest, the Lough Gara survey has also provided both new empirical evidence and innovative theoretical approaches to crannogs in Ireland.¹⁶⁹

Fredengren's publication of this survey is a significant addition to the literature on Irish crannogs and is worth reviewing here in detail.¹⁷⁰ In Part I it explores what islands do in people's mental, social and symbolic landscapes, arguing that previous accounts have focused too much on the defence of property and the exploitation of economic resources. In fact, throughout the book, Fredengren argues that a fixation with economic activities reveals the capitalist and 'economic' basis of much archaeological practice. She argues instead that archaeology can be used in 'anti-capitalist' debates and to promote and bolster local and community identities in an increasingly globalised world.

In Part II, Fredengren reviews the history of crannog research, arguing that most work in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries was devoted to reconstructing the ethnic origins and state of development of the cultures that had built crannogs. It is arguable that this intriguing section (with overemphasises ethnicity) ignores the significant political and historical context of the practice of Irish archaeology, although this is something the author admits she was largely ignorant of at the time. Nevertheless, inspired by recent developments in postprocessual archaeological theory, Fredengren convincingly argues that crannogs need to be also understood in terms of symbolism and ritual, and that social structures, cultural aspirations and value systems would have had a profound influence on how people understood and lived in the landscape from prehistory to modern times.

¹⁶⁷ Christina Fredengren, 'Discovery Programme in Lough Kinale' in *Arch. Ire.*, 62 (2002), pp 20-23.

¹⁶⁸ Cross, 'Lough Gara: a preliminary survey', pp 93-6; Anon. 'Crannóg finds at Lough Gara', pp 182-3; Raftery 'Lake-dwellings in Ireland', pp 5-15; Raftery 'Drainage and the Past', 11-3.

¹⁶⁹ Fredengren, 'Lough Gara through time', pp 31-3; Fredengren 'Islands as crannogs', pp 125-42; Fredengren, pp 24-5.

¹⁷⁰ Fredengren, *Crannogs*.

Part III discusses the modern and archaeological landscapes of Lough Gara, describing both previous and her own surveys around the lake. She presents a typology of Lough Gara's crannogs and maps the distribution of three different types (i.e. platform crannogs, low-cairn crannogs and high-cairn crannogs) around the lake. The results of a radiocarbon dating programme (summarised along with other Irish dates in Table 6.2, in this study below) are presented, suggesting the use of platform crannogs in the Mesolithic (based on an admittedly small sample), to the use of low-cairn crannogs in the Bronze Age, and low-cairn and high-cairn crannogs in the early medieval period and the late medieval period. Most importantly, Fredengren argues that this reflects a re-imagining of the role of crannogs around the lake across time, rather than 'settlement continuity'. In other words, crannogs were places that had lengthy histories and would have remained in people's consciousness and would have been re-used long after their construction.

Part IV explores the archaeological landscapes of Lough Gara across time, from the Mesolithic to the modern era. In the Mesolithic, hunter-gatherers visited the lake on a seasonal basis, offering lithic objects to the water, and perhaps burying their dead there. It could be argued that these interpretations are based on minimal evidence from the Mesolithic archaeology of the lake (mostly now covered in grass due to lakeshore vegetation changes since the 1950s), but it is certainly true that hunter-gatherers symbolic perception of landscape need to be further explored in Irish archaeology.¹⁷¹ During the Neolithic, the emphasis shifted away from the lake into the mountains, towards tombs, cairns, settlements and field-systems. In the Bronze Age and Iron Age, these 'tribal nodes' remained important, but there also emerged the practice of building crannogs on the Lough Gara lakeshore, intended as places for ritual activity, the deposition of metalwork and skulls in the water. Some crannogs may have been used as metalworking sites, but this too would have been ongoing in a liminal space where metal ores were transformed into new objects, much as human death transformed the body. Fredengren argues that all previous discussion of Bronze Age lake settlement sites had put too much emphasis on their role as domestic settlements, although does not point out that several previous Irish publications had argued precisely the same point, linking Bronze Age crannogs with 'cult' activities, public assemblies and the deposition of skulls and metalwork into watery spaces.¹⁷²

¹⁷¹ For a recent discussion of hunter-gatherers, death and cosmology, see Aidan O'Sullivan, 'Living with the dead amongst hunter-gatherers' in *Arch. Ire.* 63, (2002), pp 10-12.

¹⁷² O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 95-6; O'Sullivan, 'Interpreting the archaeology of Bronze Age lake settlements', pp 115-121, at p. 118 and p. 120.

It is in the early medieval period that there is the most intense evidence for the construction and use of crannogs on Lough Gara. Fredengren argues that study of the regional and local early medieval landscape indicates that Lough Gara's crannogs were situated in places that were peripheral to the main distribution of ringforts, crannogs, ogham stones and other 'tribal nodes'. An early medieval, low-cairn crannog was also excavated at Sroove, probably dating from somewhere within the seventh to the tenth century AD.¹⁷³ Fredengren successfully illustrates how crannogs change across time, using the idea of 'interpretative drift' to explore how people would have used this small site firstly as a domestic structure, then as an open-air platform of shattered stone used for forging iron, before being abandoned. The site is usefully contrasted with larger, high-status sites such as Lagore, indicating that poor people were also building and using crannogs. Fredengren argues that crannogs began to be used as early medieval social and political changes led to an increased focus on the family unit and a desire for privacy, although it could be argued that she does not explain why some social groups actually built islands on lakes, places which she notes were the abodes of monsters. In the late Middle Ages, Fredengren argues that high cairns of stone were built largely as the material symbols of status, independence and power of Gaelic lordships, as suggested by previous reviews of evidence elsewhere. It is arguable that the late medieval period is only sketched out and again very little use is made of historical evidence.¹⁷⁴ In conclusion, the author returns to her original discussion of 'anti-capitalist' archaeology, arguing that it can be used to bolster and support local communities' efforts at resisting the marginalisation of their lives and the commodification of their landscapes.

In brief, Fredengren's book is a challenging and important study. Ironically however, it could be argued that because of her efforts to explore long-term narratives across a vast time-span, the period in which most of her material actually resides (i.e. the early Middle Ages, between the sixth and the eleventh century AD) receives the least attention of all. The aim of this present study is to do precisely this, to explore in detail the richest and most intense period of activity on Ireland's crannogs. It could also be argued that her minimal use of early medieval historical sources means that much remains to be written about the social and ideological role of crannogs in early medieval Ireland, as will be attempted here.

¹⁷³ Radiocarbon dates cannot easily be linked to the tighter chronological framework favoured by historians, and in reality most dates have to span two or even three centuries.

¹⁷⁴ O'Sullivan, 'Crannogs in late medieval Gaelic Ireland, c.1350-c.1650', pp. 397-417; O'Sullivan, 'Crannogs – places of resistance in the contested landscapes of early modern Ireland', pp 87-101.

Conclusions

In conclusion, a study of the history of crannog scholarship reveals the different scholarly traditions and ideas, the range of interpretations offered and the rich vein of archaeological evidence it has provided for the interpretation of early Ireland. In the next chapter, this study will point to the potential for adopting new theoretical and methodological approaches to the social and ideological role of these islands in the early Middle Ages specifically.

Chapter 3

Interpreting islands: approaches to the archaeology and history of early medieval crannogs

Introduction

In attempting to reconstruct how people used crannogs in early medieval Ireland, this study will adopt a multidisciplinary approach, combining archaeological evidence, early Irish historical evidence (annals, hagiographies, narrative literature and early Irish law), palaeoenvironmental studies, anthropology and sociological theory. It would be useful first to reflect briefly on the relationships between these disciplines (particularly between history and archaeology) and how they offer usefully different and occasionally contradictory insights into the early medieval use and perception of islands and crannogs. It would also be useful to review past and present approaches to settlement and landscape in early medieval Ireland, prior to embarking upon the study of crannogs in these landscapes.

Multidisciplinary approaches: objects, texts and meanings

Places and objects: archaeological evidence

A particularly significant emphasis will be placed in this study on *archaeological evidence*, both in terms of archaeological sites, landscapes and artefact studies. This archaeological evidence will be largely interpreted within what might be termed a postprocessual interpretative framework. It will adopt the now long-accepted view that that material culture is meaningfully constituted and is active within society and culture. In other words, for the people of early medieval Ireland, material culture (i.e. dwellings, clothing, and objects) were a primary means of communicating ideas about identity and belonging within their community. Places and objects, like texts, were used by people in discourses with each other, and they themselves had biographies, changing in meaning across time. It should therefore be possible to interpret the social meaning and contexts of cairns, palisades, causeways, houses and activity areas.

It has already been shown that there is a long tradition of antiquarian and archaeological scholarship on crannogs in Ireland, and this has produced a vast array of evidence about the use of crannogs in the early Middle Ages. Archaeological surveys, excavations and artefact studies actually provide the bulk of our evidence about social and ideological

roles of early medieval crannogs. In fact, it often provides insights that are simply not available in historical sources, because while they have abundant descriptions of ringforts, houses, monastic sites and so on, there are no one historical text that provides any real detailed insights into the building, occupation and abandonment of crannogs. For example, while the early Irish laws describe raths and duns in detail, they do not even mention crannogs or island dwellings, a situation that has yet to be explained.¹ On the other hand, it will be argued here that the early medieval Irish saw crannogs as primarily *islands* and did not distinguish between built islands and natural islands. Fortunately, there is much more historical evidence for the role and perception of *islands* in the early medieval sources and these can be used to explore ideas of 'islandness', bounded spaces, marginality and edges.

The study will engage in the following chapters with a range of archaeological evidence, including site archaeological surveys conducted by the author in Westmeath (and elsewhere), as well as the results of several published local and regional archaeological excavations and surveys conducted elsewhere in Ireland. This study will also carry out a detailed analysis of the architecture and social organisation of space within some early medieval crannogs. This will be based on a detailed review of the published archaeological excavations of several significant sites, such as Lagore, Ballinderry no. 1, Ballinderry no. 2, Moynagh Lough, Sroove, Lough Faughan, Clea Lakes, Rathinaun and Bofeenaun (see Appendix 3). Clearly, as I have shown in Chapter 2 above, other crannogs have been investigated over the years in Ireland. However, of the large numbers of crannogs that have been 'dug-into' over the last one hundred and fifty years, only these ten could be considered as 'scientific excavations'.² However, some of these site excavations can be problematical as they vary in quality. Apart from the recent excavations at Moynagh Lough, Bofeenaun and Sroove, most were done many years ago (e.g. the Harvard Archaeological Expeditions work in the 1930s on Lagore, Ballinderry 1 and 2). On the other hand, there is also much of interest can be gleaned from a careful reading of the antiquarian literature, with the descriptions of crannogs across the north midlands, the northwest and south Ulster. I most certainly do not think that we should hold off on our interpretations until the archaeological record is more complete. This pessimistic view in its essence holds that some day, somebody will conduct a single brilliant crannog excavation that will answer all our remaining questions, a most unlikely proposition.

Plants, animals and lifeways: palaeoenvironmental reconstruction

¹ Fergus Kelly, pers. comm.

Palaeoenvironmental studies (taken here to also palaeozoological analyses of animal bone) also provide important information on environmental change, local vegetation, landscape management and the economic resources utilised by the early Irish. Although a detailed, modern palaeoenvironmental study of crannog landscapes has not yet been completed, much of value can be assembled.³ In particular, Finbar McCormick's analyses of animal (particularly cattle) bone from Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath and Lagore, Co. Meath have been informative about early Irish dairying, herd management and the choices of meat used for high-status feasting and assembly on some crannogs.⁴ Other animals were also kept and consumed on crannogs, including pig, sheep, goat, horse. Moreover, palaeoecological indicators of arable farming in the vicinity of crannogs include a deposit of carbonised oats on Lough Faughan, Co. Down and wheaten straw on Lagore. Most recently, Fredengren's excavations of a low-status crannog at Sroove, Co. Sligo also incorporated a detailed palaeoenvironmental research programme, including faunal studies, macrofossil studies and wood identification and tree-ring studies. Most importantly these studies enable a reconstruction of people's engagement with the natural world, their relationships with animals and the seasonal and long-term rhythms of rural life and inhabitation on a lakeshore.

Texts and contexts: early Irish historical evidence

It is also clear that *early Irish historical sources* provide an immensely rich resource for an understanding of early medieval crannogs, quite apart from the understanding they give us of early Irish society.⁵ Indeed, I would argue that archaeologists have barely begun to explore the potential of this historical evidence to provide innovative insights into the perception and role of crannogs in the settlement landscape.

The saint's lives or *hagiographies* provide insights into social organisation, the power struggles between secular and ecclesiastical rulers and the nature of agriculture, trade and economy. On occasion, they also detail interesting events and phenomena relating to

² O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 101-27.

³ The Discovery Programme's Lake Settlement Project is presently carrying out a detailed palaeoenvironmental study of crannogs on Lough Kinale, Co. Longford; Christina Fredengren and Tony Brown, pers. comm.

⁴ Finbar McCormick, 'Dairying and beef production in early Christian Ireland: the faunal evidence' in T. Reeves-Smyth and F. Hammond (eds.), *Landscape archaeology in Ireland*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 116 (London, 1983), pp 253-67; Finbar McCormick, 'Interim report on the animal bones from Moynagh Lough' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 7, no. 4 (1985-1986), pp 86-90.

⁵ Recent introductions to early medieval Irish history include; T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge, 2000); Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, *Early Medieval Ireland, 400-1200* (Harlow, 1995); Colmán Etchingham, 'Early medieval Irish history' in Kim McCone and Katherine Simms (eds.), *Progress in Medieval Irish studies* (Maynooth, 1996), pp 123-54.

crannogs and islands on lakes, revealing significant insights into islands as marginal or liminal places on water where the saint confronts various peoples and phenomena.⁶ There are problems of chronology with the saint's lives. Although most were originally composed between the seventh and the twelfth centuries AD, they were thereafter subject to centuries of accretion, editorial interference and political manipulation. Most survive as extant sources in texts dated to the late Middle Irish/early modern period, when they were compiled in such collections as the *Book of Lismore* (a fifteenth-century compilation).⁷ Early Irish historians have been able to date many of the saints' lives, usually on the basis of their language and grammar (especially when written in Irish), the use of known historical or political events or by a careful study of the manuscript's history.⁸ It could be argued that the saints' lives present a good view of early medieval Irish *mentalités*, but it would be unwise to see them as presenting an image of unchanging *longue durée* of monastic life.⁹

The earliest saints' lives were written in Hiberno-Latin, being composed in the seventh to eighth centuries AD. In fact, Sharpe has proposed that a substantial proportion of the saints' lives in late medieval collections can be dated to the eighth to ninth century AD.¹⁰ By the ninth century AD, there was a major shift towards the use of the vernacular, Irish.¹¹ Thereafter, the bulk of the Irish lives were written between the ninth and the eleventh centuries AD, although there were important later texts. In this study, the dating evidence for each Life used will be given, where possible. Thence, the Latin *Life* of Áed mac Bricc probably dates to the eighth century AD, the *Life* of Senán¹² and the *Life* of Mochua of Balla can be dated to the tenth century,¹³ while the *Life* of Colmáin maicc Lúacháin dates to the twelfth century AD.¹⁴

Early Irish law, (typically dated to seventh to eighth century AD) although silent on the

⁶ For introductions to early Irish hagiography, see Máire Herbert, 'Hagiography' in McCone and Simms (eds.), *Progress*, pp. 79-90; Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' Lives. An introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1991), pp 3-75; Charles Doherty, 'Some aspects of hagiography as a source for Irish economic history' in *Peritia*, 1 (1982), pp 300-28; A.S. MacShamhráin, *Church and polity in pre-Norman Ireland: the case of Glendalough* (Maynooth 1996), pp 1-35.

⁷ Some edited collections of saint's lives include Charles Plummer (ed.), *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford, 1910); Charles Plummer (ed. and trans.), *Bethada Náem nÉirenn: Lives of Irish Saints* (Oxford, 1922); Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford, 1890).

⁸ Herbert, 'Hagiography', pp 84-6.

⁹ Herbert, 'Hagiography', p. 85.

¹⁰ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints lives*, pp 384-5.

¹¹ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints lives*, pp 19-20.

¹² Doherty, 'Hagiography as a source for Irish economic history', p. 307.

¹³ Doherty, Hagiography as a source for Irish economic history, p. 310.

¹⁴ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' lives*, p. 27.

subject of crannogs in particular, provides invaluable information on contemporary settlement, social status, kinship, land-holding patterns, social role of boundaries (important on islands and lake-shores) and so on.¹⁵ The early Irish genealogies while not particularly useful on the question of crannogs, do indicate the interest that people had with the past, relating origins of kings and queens for distinctively ideological reasons.¹⁶ The *annals*, despite their brief, laconic style, provide information on political history and genealogy, as well as on places, territories and events across the settlement landscapes studied here (particularly within the kingdom of Mide between the sixth and the eleventh century AD, large because of its political significance as a region). There are frequent annalistic references to deaths, battles and other events on lakes, islands and lake-fortresses that can, with caution, enable the scholar to pinpoint actual historical crannog locations.¹⁷ The *narrative literature*, particularly the *echtrae* (adventure tales) and *immrama* (voyage tales), although little used by archaeologists, provide unusual and intriguing insights into contemporary beliefs and *mentalités* relating to water, journeys and island encounters.¹⁸ For example, in the various voyage tales, islands are often as portrayed as places of the 'other', where mythical beings, monsters and unnatural phenomena can be expected.¹⁹

Multidisciplinary approaches: problems and potential

In recent times, scholars have increasingly stressed the importance of multidisciplinary

¹⁵ For general introductions to early Irish law, see Fergus Kelly, *A guide to early Irish law* (Dublin, 1988); Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin, 1997); Liam Breatnach, 'Law' in McCone and Simms (eds.), *Progress*, pp. 107-22; major editions are published in Daniel Binchy (ed.), *Corpus Iuris Hibernii* vols. i-vi (Dublin, 1978).

¹⁶ Some genealogies are edited by M.A. O'Brien (ed.), *Corpus genealogiarum Hiberniae* (Dublin, 1976); A general discussion is provided by Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Creating the past: the early Irish genealogical tradition' in *Peritia* 12 (1998), pp 177-208.

¹⁷ General introductions to the Irish annals include, Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *The medieval Irish annals*. Irish History (Dublin, 1975). The main annals to be used here will be *A.U.*; Seán Mac Airt and Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Annals of Ulster: Vol. i (to A.D. 1131)* (Dublin, 1983); and for subsequent years, W.M. Hennessy and B. Mac Carthy, *Annála Uladh, Annals of Ulster* 4 vols (Dublin, 1887-1901); see also *Ann. Conn.*, A.M. Freeman (ed.), *Annála Connacht. The Annals of Connacht* (AD 1224-1544), (Dublin, 1944; reprint 1970); *A.F.M.*, John O'Donovan *Annála Ríoghachta Éireann. Annals of the kingdom of Ireland by the Four Masters*, 7 vols (Dublin, 1848-51).

¹⁸ An introduction to the narrative literature is provided by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, 'Early Irish narrative literature' in McCone and Simms, *Progress*, pp 55-64; a recent anthology of narrative literature is provided by J.T. Koch and J. Carey (eds.), *The Celtic heroic age. Literary sources for ancient Celtic Europe and early Ireland and Wales* (Andover, Mass., 1994); for a recent anthology on early Irish voyage tales, see J.M. Wooding (ed.), *The otherworld voyage in early Irish literature: an anthology of criticism* (Dublin, 2000).

¹⁹ For discussion of islands as significant places of the otherworld in the narrative literature, see Prionsias Mac Cana, 'The sinless otherworld of Immram Brain' in *Ériu* 27 (1976), pp 95-115; Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Distant islands: The topography of holiness in the *Nauigatio sancti Brendani*' in M. Glasscoe (ed.), *The medieval mystical tradition – England, Ireland and Wales* (Woodbridge, 1999), pp 1-20.

approaches in projects investigating early medieval Ireland.²⁰ This appears to be based on the proposition that the different sets of evidence provided by archaeology, history, geography and palaeoenvironmental studies can be used to build more complete and reliable explanations of past cultural histories. This is certainly an argument with some merit. However, it might be useful to briefly critique the ideas behind multidisciplinary approaches. Early Irish history, with its strong Germanic heritage of scholarship, has traditionally been written according to a strongly empiricist school (although, in recent years, it has of course expanded in various ways). Similarly, as stated above, most archaeological studies of early medieval Ireland still tend to be empirical, cultural-historical or more recently processual narratives. The relationships between the two have rarely been critically explored. A traditional view of the relationship between archaeology and history was that archaeology as a discipline was best equipped to answer questions about economy, technology and environment, while history was considered more suited to discuss social organisation, politics and ideology.²¹ Thence, many archaeological studies will analyse in detail the evidence provided by landscapes, sites, artefacts or palaeoenvironmental detail and then use the rich early Irish historical sources to provide any required social interpretations. For example, Lynn's studies of early medieval houses (although extremely valuable and original) have usually outlined their formal style or place within a sequence of architectural development, with location, shape, size, building materials and internal features all seen as key features for analysis. He then typically draws down upon the early Irish historical sources to enable an understanding of the social organisation of domestic space. This is understandable. The early Irish laws, in particular the eighth-century *Crith Gablach*, provide a surprising range of commentary on house size and social status, construction details and the types of domestic equipment used within them.

More recently, a number of archaeological studies written from a processual, or systems, perspective have constructed hypothetical, anthropological models of early Irish society on the basis of the historical sources (e.g. Gibson's discussion of the evolution from

²⁰ For recent statements on the importance of multidisciplinary approaches to early medieval Ireland, see Michael Ryan, 'Archaeology' in McCone and Simms (eds.), *Progress*, pp 155-164; M.A. Monk and J. Sheehan, 'Research and early medieval Munster: Agenda or vacuum?' in Monk and Sheehan (eds.), *Early medieval Munster*, pp 1-8; Matthew Stout, 'Early Christian Ireland: settlement and environment' in Terry Barry (ed.), *A history of settlement in Ireland* (London and New York, 2000), pp 81-109.

²¹ Some useful recent discussions of the relationships between early medieval archaeology and history include; S.T. Driscoll, 'The relationship between history and archaeology: artifacts, documents and power' in S.T. Driscoll and M.R. Níeke, (eds.), *Power and politics in early medieval Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp 162-87; K.R. Dark, *Discovery by design: the identification of secular elite settlements in western Britain A.D. 400-700*, BAR British Series 237. (Oxford, 1994), pp 1-14.

chiefdoms to state societies, or Mytum's ideas about the transformative effect of early Christianity). The archaeological record is then used as a kind of ethnographic or anthropological resource to test the various theories. Most recently this can be seen in Stout's distinctly processual or new geography approach to Irish ringforts. He first carries out detailed statistical analyses to establish the range of different types of ringfort. He then uses the eighth-century law-tract *Crith Gablach* as the *primary* means of constructing a model of early Irish society. It could be argued that this both ignores the socially conservative and ideological intention of that particular law text, while also failing to explore the true potential of the archaeology.

Either way, the much-vaunted multidisciplinary approach typically leads to archaeologists uncritically adopting early Irish historical sources as the main source for interpreting the material record. This approach is a classic illustration of the way that archaeology is commonly seen the poorer relation of history (i.e. 'history tells us what people thought, archaeology then tells us what people did'). Ironically, archaeologists thus also ignore the real potential of the archaeological evidence in front of them. In the past (and today), material culture was actively used by people as a means of communication. Recognising this, most theoretical archaeologists would certainly consider that material culture is as amenable to sophisticated 'readings' of people's beliefs and intentions as historical texts, and that it can be used to offer comments on social life during the period.

However, an even more interesting picture emerges when we consider the social and ideological agendas behind both objects and texts. Recently, as part of general theoretical trends within archaeology, some early medieval archaeologists have turned to poststructural theory to explore the past and present relationships between text and object.²² Moreland has recently suggested that we should consider historical texts and archaeology not merely as *sources of evidence about the past*, but to consider that both were distinct ways of *communicating meaning in the past*.²³ He argues that what he calls the Word (historical records), the Voice (oral traditions) and the Object (material culture) originally all served as different means of communication in the Middle Ages.

²² For more recent theoretical discussions of the relationships between archaeology and history, see David Austin, 'The proper study of medieval archaeology' in David Austin and Leslie Alcock (eds.), *From the Baltic to the Black Sea: Studies in Medieval Archaeology* (London, 1990), pp 9-35; David Austin and Julian Thomas, 'The proper study of medieval archaeology: A case study' in Austin and Alcock (eds.), *From the Baltic to the Black Sea*, pp 43-76; John Moreland, 'The Middle Ages, theory and post-modernism' in *Acta Archaeologica* 68 (1997), pp 163-82; Johnson, *Archaeological theory*, pp 149-61.

²³ John Moreland, *Archaeology and text* (London, 2001).

Arguing that we live a logocentric culture because of the iconoclasm and biblically-centred thinking of the early modern period, he states that we naturally tend to privilege only the texts in our narratives about the past, seeing it as the truest version of events. Taking Moreland's views on board, we would consider the early Irish documentary sources as artefacts used by *people in the past* to communicate ideologies of power, status and so on. Therefore, in adopting what might be considered multidisciplinary approaches to early medieval crannogs in Ireland, we should be considering at all times the original ideological intentions behind texts, oral narratives and material culture.

Theoretical and methodological approaches to settlement and landscape

Introduction: approaches to settlement and landscape in archaeological thought

In exploring the archaeology and history of crannogs, it is important to consider how people thought about and understood the places and landscapes that they inhabited in early medieval Ireland. Archaeologists, historians and historical geographers have adopted a range of methodological and theoretical approaches while attempting to do this, often derived from wider developments in world scholarship. In the following sections, the various theoretical approaches to settlement and landscape archaeology that will be used in this study will be outlined.

Settlement and landscape archaeology, broadly speaking, explore the ways that people dwell, work, move around and understand the worlds in which they live. 'Landscape archaeology' is a broad term, not focusing solely on dwellings, but incorporating the study of the diverse physical, cognitive, historical and social landscapes that people inhabit. 'Settlement archaeology' has tended to be more focused. It has a long tradition of scholarship in archaeology and has traditionally been seen as the study of dwelling places, houses and the organisation of settlement activity across the landscape. In the past, settlement archaeologists have sought to explore how people, based on various social, ideological, economic, ritual and practical factors, decided to locate their dwelling places, houses, settlements and ritual structures in the places they decided. Using this evidence, they then attempted to reconstruct the social, economic and ideological relationships between different social groups and communities.²⁴

²⁴ For brief reviews of the history of 'settlement archaeology' see A.B. Knapp, *The archaeology of Late Bronze Age Cypriot society* (Glasgow, 1997), pp 4-7; B.M. Fagan, *In the beginning* (New York, 1997), pp 321-57.

Processual approaches to settlement and landscape

'Settlement archaeology' as a discipline largely emerged amongst archaeologists working in the North Americas in the 1950s, where extensive and innovative regional studies were carried out using survey, excavation and other sources of information. By the late 1960s, settlement archaeology in North America and Europe was often commonly studied in terms of Bruce Trigger's three defined levels; the house or structure (the *household*), the arrangement of structures within settlements (the *community*) and the distribution of communities across the landscape (*regions*).²⁵ Typically in regional research projects, the spatial relationships between contemporary settlement sites was seen as comprising the *settlement pattern*, while the social, ideological and functional relationships between these sites within that settlement pattern, was termed the *settlement system*. Processual archaeologists in the 1960s and 1970s, inspired by contemporary developments in sociology and the 'new geography' typically employed various quantitative and interpretative methods in the analysis of such settlement patterns and systems. The locations of settlements across geographical spaces were analysed using *site catchment analysis* (providing an inventory of the economic resources used by a community within a defined district), site distribution maps (locating defined 'sites' within study areas), and *spatial analysis*, including both cluster analysis and central-place theory. The main aim of these processual studies was to construct generalised hypotheses of past human spatial behaviour within an often abstract space represented by a map.

Interestingly, many of these approaches remain central to the ways that archaeologists organise, interpret and present settlement data. In particular, the organisation of buildings and houses are still seen as useful for understanding the social, cultural and ideological aspects of a household, family or other social group. The study of the spatial organisation of domestic, industrial and ritual activities within and across, an individual settlement are provide a means of reconstructing the histories and social organisation of particular communities. Finally, regional landscape studies still provide a mainstay for analyses of populations and demographics, political territories and boundaries, as well as social organisation at a broad scale. It is also evident that most settlement studies still focus on individual 'sites', despite the recognition that people do not live, work, eat and die within the confines of any particular place, and that activities in places away from and outside of bounded settlements are as significant. However, it is still possible to work

²⁵ Bruce Trigger, *Time and traditions: essays in archaeological interpretation* (New York, 1978), pp

within a 'site-oriented' approach, as long as these other 'off-site' activities are also considered.

By the 1980s, problems were being recognised with these processual approaches to settlement archaeology, not least the fact that they lead to universal functionalist explanations for the organisation of settlement space in different cultures across the world. They ignored the fact that the use of space is culturally and historically specific. They also obscured the fact that settlements were not merely the backdrops to human action, but were actively involved in the production of social relations.

Postprocessual approaches to settlement and landscape

Postprocessual archaeological critiques of previous studies since the 1990s have gradually led to settlement studies being largely carried out within the scope of 'landscape archaeological projects'. Landscape archaeology is a usefully ambiguous term that is difficult to define, but it encompasses a diverse range of methodological and philosophical approaches. It could be said that postprocessual landscape archaeology focuses on the interaction between people and their surroundings, but particularly on the complex social ways that people know, understand and shape the worlds in which they live. It explores how people as knowledgeable social agents understood, experienced and perceived the landscape and how they used places for the negotiation and contesting of cultural, ideological and ethnic identities. Landscape archaeological projects also tend to work at a range of different geographical scales, exploring how people inhabited dwellings, moved along routeways, buried their dead at significant locales and worked out in the fields.²⁶

In recent years, many postprocessual archaeologists have shown interest in phenomenological perspectives, emphasising a person-centred view of the world, often exploring the dynamics of how people might move through and around a landscape,

168-9.

²⁶ General introductions to landscape archaeology include; Barbara Bender (ed.), *Landscape: politics and perspectives* (Oxford, 1993); E. Hirsch and M. O'Hanlon (eds.), *The anthropology of landscape: perspectives on place and space* (Oxford, 1995); W. Ashmore and A.B. Knapp (eds.), *Archaeologies of landscape* (Oxford, 1999); R. Layton and P.J. Ucko (eds.), *The archaeology and anthropology of landscape* (London, 1999); Tim Ingold, 'The temporality of the landscape' in *World Archaeology* 25 (1993), pp 152-74; A. Gramsch, 'Landscape archaeology: of making and seeing' in *Journal of European Archaeology* 4 (1997), pp 19-38; Robert Johnston, 'The paradox of landscape' in *European Journal of Archaeology* 1 (1998), pp 313-25; Robert Johnson, 'Approaches to the perception of landscape' in *Archaeological Dialogues* 5 (1998), pp 54-68; Julian Thomas, 'Archaeologies of place and landscape' in Ian Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological theory today* (Oxford, 2001), pp 165-86.

seeing its places from different viewpoints and experiencing it in motion.²⁷ It could be argued that such phenomenological approaches, while usefully encouraging scholars to take account of how people perceive and think about place and space, have not succeeded in providing many useful insights into the past. They have been accused of being 'presentist' and superficial, with authors merely writing about their subjective encounters with modern archaeological sites.²⁸ In particular, there has been a tendency to impose modern views of landscape on the past and a failure to recognise that how people perceive and think about landscape is always culturally and historically specific and contingent on status, gender, social role, age and personal experience.²⁹ For example, the peoples of early medieval Ireland would have had quite distinctively different 'perception' of their landscapes than we might be able to 'imagine' or 'experience'. However, use of the early Irish sources may allow some insights to be gained of how early medieval people 'imagined' their world.

On the other hand, there is now a broad acceptance of the potential of a more theoretically informed approach to the landscapes and settlements of past societies. It is likely that future landscape projects will focus on the *active role* of place and landscape in social life (in terms of power, memory, identity and community). Landscape projects will also adopt methodological approaches that encourage the integration of diverse ranges of evidence (documentary, cartographic, environmental evidence, site and landscape survey, artefact studies) within a series of geographical scales (place, locality, and region), while aiming for an understanding of long-term historical developments.

Reconstructing settlement and landscape in early medieval Ireland

Introduction

If these are the main theoretical approaches in settlement and landscape archaeology today, then it is arguable that the study of the settlements and landscapes of early medieval Ireland are still largely derived from either culture-historical³⁰ or processual

²⁷ For the classic example of phenomenological approaches to landscape, see Christopher Tilley, *A phenomenology of landscape: Places, paths and monuments* (Oxford, 1994).

²⁸ Dan Hicks, 'Archaeology unfolding; diversity and the loss of isolation' in *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 22, no. 3 (2003), pp 315-29, at p. 319.

²⁹ For criticisms of phenomenological approaches to landscape, see Joanna Brück, 'In the footsteps of the ancestors: a review of Christopher Tilley's *A phenomenology of landscape: Places, paths and monuments*' in *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 15 (1998), pp 23-36; Carleton Jones, 'Interpreting the perceptions of past people' in *Archaeological Review from Cambridge* 15 (1998), pp 7-22.

³⁰ For culture-historical approaches to early medieval settlement, see Máire De Paor and Liam De Paor, *Early Christian Ireland* (London, 1960), pp 73-109; Edwards, *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland*, pp 6-47.

approaches.³¹ For example, Stout's recent studies of early medieval ringforts essentially adopt the methodology and explanatory models typically used in processual or 'new geography' studies in the 1980s. He employs detailed cluster analysis of the morphological features of ringforts and spatial and distribution studies of their locations to establish a hierarchy of different types and then to propose social and functionalist relationships between them. He then explains this *settlement system* in terms of the hierarchical views of society as presented in early Irish laws.³² Stout's studies are immensely valuable and are already influential, but it could be argued that they barely explore any more recent ideas about landscape, memory and identity. In fact, there have been very few postprocessual studies of early medieval landscapes. Fredengren's recent study of crannogs on Lough Gara, Co. Sligo/Roscommon is arguably the first attempt to offer interpretations that explore people's perception of the landscape, the active role of place and material culture and the diachronic, historical development of the settlement landscape around the lake (since prehistory). However, here the problem is the lack of any contemporary historical, political or social perspective or any attempt to really integrate the early medieval crannogs with our wider understanding of early Irish society.

Early medieval settlement and landscape, sixth to eighth century AD

In fact, early medieval settlement and landscape studies in Ireland only rarely explore regional landscapes, regions or places so that most models of society are still based on national patterns.³³ Nevertheless, recent multidisciplinary reviews of settlement archaeology offer a general picture of how the early medieval settlement landscape was organised between the seventh and the tenth century AD. Inevitably, most studies tend to concentrate on the evidence for social hierarchies, ignoring the equally important aspects of kinship, clientship, ceremony and labour.

³¹ For processual approaches to early medieval settlement and landscape, see Mytum, *Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp 102-65; D.B. Gibson, 'Chiefdoms, confederacies, and statehood in early Ireland' in B. Arnold and D.B. Gibson, (eds.), *Celtic chiefdom, Celtic state* (Cambridge, 1995), pp 116-28; D.B. Gibson, 'Nearer my chieftain to thee: Central Place Theory and chiefdoms, revisited' in M.W. Diehl, (ed.), *Hierarchies in action: Cui bono?* (Southern Illinois University, 2000), pp 241-63.

³² For example, Matthew Stout, 'Ringforts in the south-west midlands of Ireland' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 91c, (1991), pp 201-43; Matthew Stout, 'Early Christian settlement, society and economy in Offaly' in W. Nolan and T. O'Neill (eds.), *Offaly: History and society* (Dublin, 1998), pp 29-92.

³³ Some recent regional studies include; M.A. Monk, 'Early medieval secular and ecclesiastical settlement in Munster' in Monk and Sheehan (eds.), *Early medieval Munster*, pp 33-52; Mark Clinton, 'Settlement patterns in the early historic kingdom of Leinster' in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), pp 275-98; Mark Clinton, 'Settlement dynamics in Co. Meath: the



Fig. 3.1 An early medieval multivallate ringfort and an early medieval crannog at Lisleitrim, Co. Armagh. It is likely that this is a royal settlement complex, with prominent siting and impressive architecture being used to project a normative image of power in the landscape (Source: Aidan O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement in Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), p. 137, pl. 44).

It is abundantly clear from both archaeological evidence and historical sources that early medieval Irish society was intensely hierarchical, with profound social inequalities and a ranked social system. The powerful in society, whether they be the upper social classes, clerics or otherwise privileged, deliberately projected normative images of their social position, representing their wealth and status by the inhabitation of impressive dwellings (such as multivallate ringforts, promontory forts, and occasionally high-status crannogs) prominently situated in the landscape (Fig. 3.1).

Social elites also used a range of other locations within early medieval topographies of power, such as public assembly places, royal churches, ancient burial mounds and so on. Nobles controlled land and cattle herds, loaning them to client farmers within complex networks of clientship and social obligation, and so did not farm their own land. In fact lordly sites may have been primarily located with other functions in mind, such as the defence of territories and so on. The powerful in society also used exotic foodstuffs (e.g. wine, spices, as well as the pottery they were imported within) and objects, such as glass

kingdom of Lóegaire' in *Peritia* 14 (2000), pp 372-405.

vessels, clothing and personal jewellery to project an image of wealth and status, while they also patronised crafts to produce goods for use within complex networks of social obligation. The church was involved in similar activities, and secular and ecclesiastical sites are often located in complementary locations, indicating that the church controlled its own agricultural lands and had its own tenants.

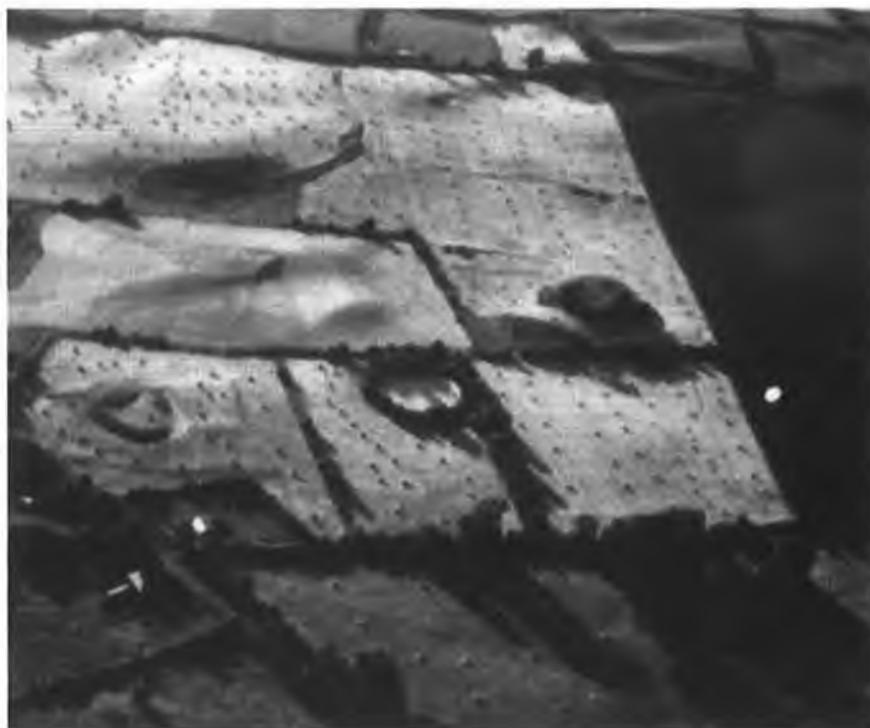


Fig. 3.2 Aerial photograph of three early medieval ringforts in Loughanstown townland in the barony of Corkaree, Co. Westmeath, between Lough Derravarragh and Lough Owel. These ringforts with their enclosed spaces, banks and ditches, prominent siting and proximity to each other illustrate the locally dense early medieval settlement on the good agricultural soils of Westmeath (CUCAP AVO 61, after Stout 1997, plate 8).

However, most of the early medieval Irish population, particularly ‘strong farmers’, the free commoner social classes (see Chapter 4 below) or craftspeople, also inhabited ringforts, crannogs and various types of other enclosed settlements (Fig. 3.2). Ringforts were primarily the homesteads of farmers, and have produced evidence for stock-rearing (primarily cattle, sheep and pigs) and arable agriculture (in the form of ploughs, reaping hooks, quern stones and cereal grains). It is clear that ringforts were also located with the practical realities of farming in mind, as studies have shown they are predominantly located on good, well-drained soils, close to a water source and avoiding low-lying wetlands and mountainous uplands. They are also clearly influenced in their siting by boundaries and routeways. It is also suggested that ringforts generally avoid routeways,

but that high-status sites tend to be located in contentious border areas.³⁴ Ringforts have also produced evidence for craft working associated with daily life (i.e. spinning, weaving), as well as occasional evidence for specialist production, particularly of iron and bronze. Ringforts are the most common settlement form and their dense geographical distribution across the landscape testifies to concepts of community, neighbourhood and land ownership and use.³⁵ Whether these ringforts are dispersed or clustered together, their inhabitants were certainly linked by social and economic interaction and co-operation.

Stout has recently suggested that these ringfort morphologies and distributions reflect the social hierarchies outlined in the early Irish laws, so that larger multivallate ringforts may have served as lordly sites and as strategic or military strongholds, while bivallate or univallate ringforts may have served as homesteads of strong farmers, while simple univallate sites clustered around larger ringforts may have been the homesteads of base clients or tenants. He has proposed a hypothetical model of the social organisation of the early medieval settlement landscape (i.e. sixth-ninth century AD), largely based on his own detailed studies in the south-west midlands.³⁶ In this normative model (Fig. 3.3), the lord's (*aire forgill*) multivallate ringfort would be located in a commanding, highly visible site, being close to an important routeway. His ringfort would be surrounded by the simple, univallate forts of his *ócaire* tenants, who rented land from him and also provided him with labour services on his own farm. The ringfort of the lower-grade, *aire deso* lord would be on level terrain near the *túath* boundary, reflecting his role in territorial defence and the hosting of raids into rival territories. The ringforts of the *bóaire* farmers would be located on good agricultural land, but at some remove, indicating that these independent farmers owned and worked their own land, albeit with cattle herds and equipment 'rented' from their lord (either the *aire forgill* or *aire deso*). A significant church site is located on the routeway and some land is either farmed in common or is in woodland. This model looks set to be a highly influential one in early medieval settlement studies, although it has not been universally agreed with or yet tested by archaeological excavation. It could also be criticised because it assumes a contemporaneity of sites. It also overlooks the peripatetic nature of kingship, whereby a king of even a small kingdom would own several sites, moving around between them.

³⁴ Matthew Stout, *The Irish ringfort* (Dublin, 1997), p. 133.

³⁵ Stout, *The Irish ringfort* discusses ringfort morphology, function, dating, siting and distribution.

³⁶ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, p. 126; Stout, 'Ringforts in the south-west midlands of Ireland', pp 239.

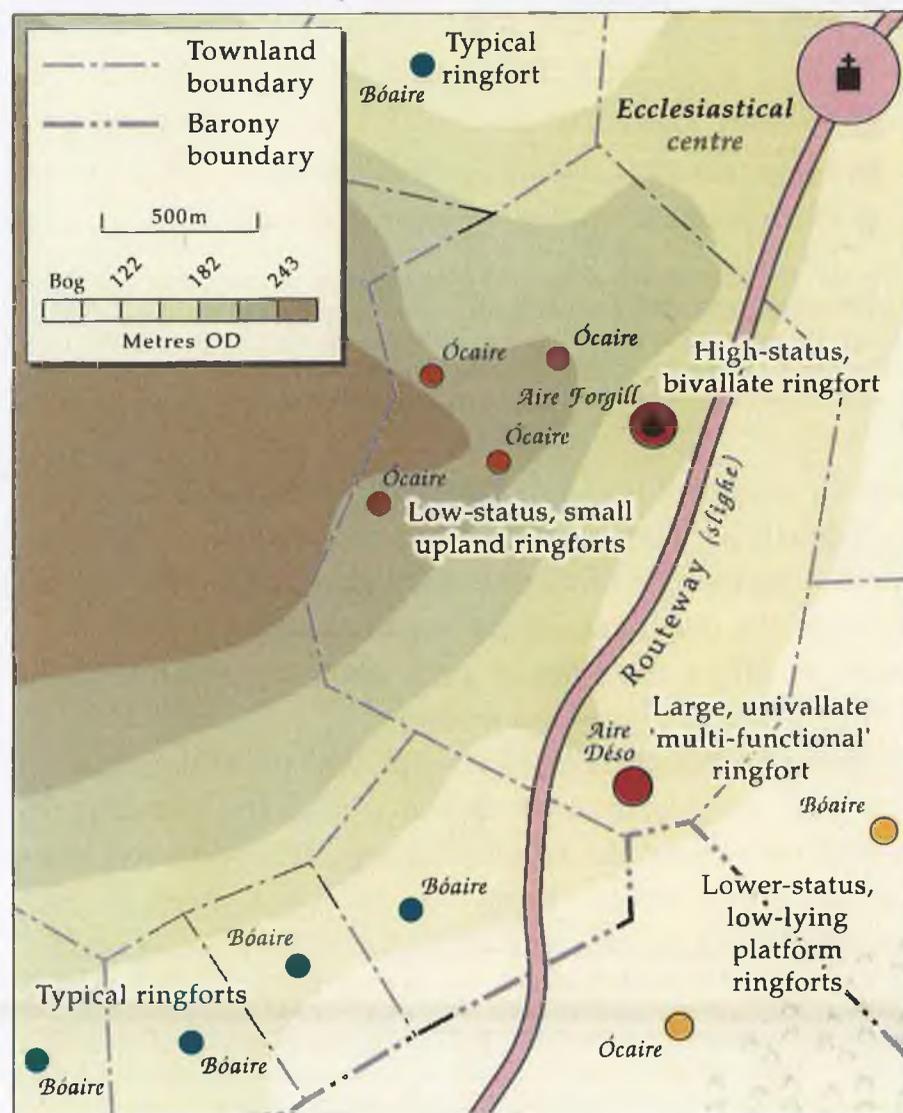


Fig. 3.3 Stout's hypothetical model of the social organisation of the early medieval settlement landscape (i.e. sixth-ninth century AD) in the southwest midlands. The lord's (*aire forgill*) multivallate ringfort is located in a commanding site, near an important routeway and is surrounded by the simple, univallate forts of his *ócaire* tenants. The ringfort of the *aire deso* lord is on level terrain near the *túath* boundary, indicating his role in territorial defence. The ringforts of the *bóaire* farmers are further away, indicating that these independent farmers owned their own land. A significant church site is located on the routeway and some land is either farmed in common or is in woodland. (Source: Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, p. 126).

The lower social classes (see Chapter 4 below), such as 'semi-freemen' (*fuidir*), cottiers (*bothach*) and slaves (*mug*) presumably inhabited various dwellings that have generally proven difficult to distinguish. These people may have lived in houses clustered around their lord's ringfort or crannog, enabling them to easily work on his lands, although it is possible that serfs and slaves also lived in unenclosed dwellings or houses situated out within field-systems, close to the actual location of their labour. Unenclosed houses and dwellings have been found and their sparse material culture might suggest that they were

used by people of low social status.³⁷ There must also have been various other marginal social groups that are rarely considered in the historical texts, people who did not own houses, but moved around through the edges of the landscape, such as uplands, marshes and woodlands. There were also types of specialised locales, associated with specific ritual, agricultural or industrial tasks, such as small churches, graveyards and holy wells in isolated locations, upland enclosures possibly used during the summer booleying of cattle, mills used occasionally for grinding grain (presumably with huts in the vicinity for the millers) or isolated forges episodically used for metalworking. While this presents a generalised image of the settlement landscape between, say, the seventh and the eighth century AD, it is clear that locally, regionally and across the island there was significant variation.

Early medieval settlement and landscape, ninth to eleventh century AD

It is also likely that there were profound changes in this settlement landscape throughout the early medieval period, but this has proven difficult to trace. It is certainly likely that most ringforts and crannogs were gradually being abandoned by the ninth century, but what they were replaced by remains unclear. In any case, it is likely that the settlement landscape of the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries was quite different, although archaeologists have found it difficult to establish how that settlement landscape was organised.

Early Irish historians have suggested that population growth, economic changes and an increase in regional dynastic warfare in the ninth and tenth century may have placed the client and kinship-based social system under significant pressure.³⁸ The lower social classes may have found it increasingly difficult to meet their social obligations of labour and food, so that dislodged peoples may have attached themselves to emerging powerful secular and ecclesiastical authorities. It has been argued that this is essentially a shift towards a new social order, whereby serfs had fealty to a lord or bishop and provided labour and military services that might be better associated with nascent 'feudalism'.

³⁷ For example, Cormac McSparron, 'The excavation of an unenclosed house of the early Christian period at Drumadonnell, County Down' in *U.J.A.* 60 (2001), pp 47-56, a site that is remarkably free of artefacts.

³⁸ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans* (Dublin, 1972), pp 111-37; B.J. Graham, 'Early Medieval Ireland: Settlement as an indicator of social and economic transformation, c.500 – 1100' in B.J. Graham and L.J. Proudfoot (eds.), *An historical geography of Ireland* (London, 1993), pp 19-57, esp. p. 21; Charles Doherty, 'Settlement in early Ireland: A review' in Terry Barry (ed.), *A history of settlement in Ireland* (London, 2000), pp 50-80. However, some early Irish historians have questioned the reality of this population increase; Nerys Patterson, *Cattle lords and clansmen: the social structure of early Ireland* (Notre Dame and London, 1994), pp 368-75; Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland, 400-1200*, p. 108.

Some archaeologists and early Irish historians have proposed that there may have been a gradual shift towards a semi-nucleated form of settlement in the ninth and tenth centuries, with unenclosed 'villages' of small communities clustered around 'central places'.³⁹ It is suggested that these nucleated settlements would have been clustered around significant lordly sites, or around churches and monasteries that had grown in economic importance (Fig. 3.4).

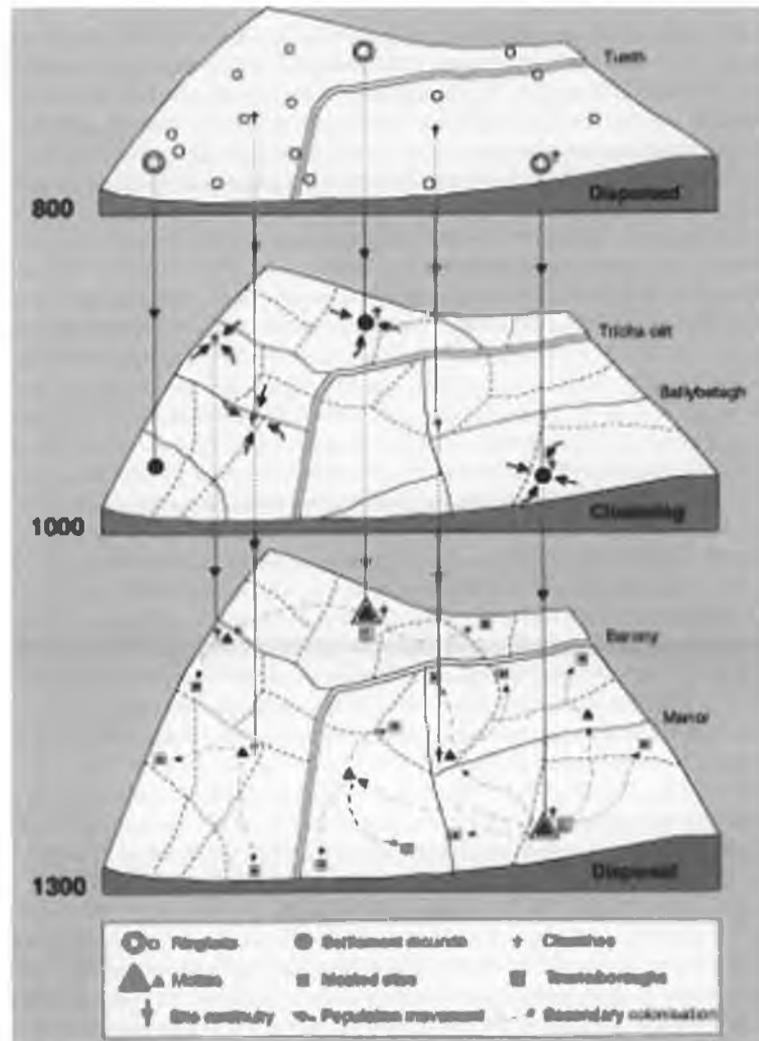


Fig. 3.4 A hypothetical model of social and settlement continuity and change towards the end of the early Middle Ages. This suggests that in the ninth and tenth century, there was a shift away from a 'dispersed' settlement pattern as ringforts were being abandoned, with a emergence of 'nucleated' settlements in the eleventh and twelfth century, focused on lordly sites (i.e. raised raths) and significant church settlements. Although archaeologists and historians have traced some evidence for this change, it remains largely unsubstantiated. (Source: Tadhg O'Keeffe, *Medieval Ireland: an archaeology* (Stroud, 2000), p. 25, Fig. 7).

³⁹ Doherty, 'Settlement in early Ireland', pp 57-9.

There is some evidence that particular ringforts, the residences of powerful individuals perhaps, were built up and raised into platform or raised ringforts in the ninth and tenth centuries (sites like Rathmullan, Co. Down and Knowth, Co. Meath may have been such lordly strongholds). However, there is no archaeological evidence as yet to show that they were surrounded by clusters of houses of their tenants. In contrast, there is some palaeoenvironmental evidence for an expansion in agricultural activity in the ninth and tenth century, perhaps related to the growing wealth and power of the church.⁴⁰ It is also possible that such churches and monastic sites became the focus of markets and cattle 'marts', possibly also with input from local secular lords. For these reasons, 'monastic towns' may have emerged by the tenth and eleventh centuries, at the same time as coastal towns were being established by Hiberno-Norse populations, providing elites with high-status goods and silver.

By the eleventh century, the early medieval settlement landscape was probably significantly different from what had been there before. However, as there is still palaeoenvironmental evidence for an open, agricultural landscape, there must have been a continuity of dispersed settlements too. There may well have been many unenclosed or 'open' settlements scattered through fields and farms. In appearance, these may have looked like a house or two, with their outside yards, middens and activity areas, but with no enclosing boundary feature. Early medieval souterrains (typically dated to between the seventh and the tenth centuries AD) occasionally provide evidence for such unenclosed settlements, as several souterrains have produced evidence for unenclosed houses close to the entry to the passage and chamber.⁴¹

Interpretative approaches to early medieval crannogs in Ireland

Interpreting crannogs in the early medieval landscape

Clearly then, there is both a wide range of evidence and a diversity of potential interpretive approaches to early medieval crannogs as sites, while they also need to be considered in terms of their wider social and settlement landscapes. Firstly, it is important to consider how crannogs may have been understood and used within the social, economic and ideological landscapes of early medieval Ireland. In the early Middle Ages, the occupants of a crannog would have been aware of, and familiar with,

⁴⁰ M.A. Monk, 'Early medieval secular and ecclesiastical settlement', pp 46-9; V.A. Hall, 'The documentary and pollen analytical records of the vegetational history of the Irish landscape, AD 200-1650' in *Peritia* 14 (2000), pp 342-71, at p. 368.

⁴¹ Mark Clinton, *The souterrains of Ireland* (Dublin, 2001), pp 205-6.

the local settlement landscape around the lake, with its ringforts, unenclosed dwellings, churches, burial places, holy wells, as well as its fields, roads and lanes, woodlands and so on. Although crannogs were apparently isolated island dwellings, surrounded by water, it was the entire landscape that formed the backdrop and context of all social, economic and ideological relationships within the community.

In other words, crannogs were not exotic, isolated objects separated from the rest of the world, but places that were knitted into within the wider settlement landscapes. This can be demonstrated by exploring their siting in relation to lake topography, local soils, and the environment. Their role in the social landscape can also be assessed by exploring their relationships with other early medieval sites (e.g. ringforts, churches, holy wells). It is also possible to explore their location at potential early medieval political boundaries and with potential early medieval routeways. In early medieval Westmeath, as elsewhere, crannogs were located within quite densely occupied early medieval landscapes, and were occasionally used as islands at the edge to manipulate people's views of them, to thereby control access to them and manipulate how people perceived and understood the landscape around them. For example, some early medieval crannogs in Westmeath were built and occupied at particular types of places (e.g. in small bays, at the ends of promontories and loughs adjacent to esker routeways) where they would have physically and symbolically dominated the landscape around them. Visible from around the lake and overlooked by settlements around them, they may have served as social 'stages' within the natural theatre of the landscape itself. On other occasions, they are extraordinarily remote, suggesting a desire for isolation, distance and even a degree of social marginality.

This suggests that crannogs can usefully be thought about as places (or arenas) in the social landscape for the enactment and negotiation of various social relationships, in both everyday and ceremonial occasions. How might this be achieved? One approach is to use phenomenology, exploring how people's understanding of their world was first and foremost constructed by their physical and psychological experience of it, so that sight, smell, hearing and touch – all have to be allowed for in any reconstruction of the use of a crannog. In the early Middle Ages, people's experiences and encounters with crannogs in the landscape could have included distant views of them from the shore, journeys to them across deep and dangerous water by boat or by wading across shallow water. Upon arrival at them, closer views would have enabled inspection of their stone cairns, gates and entrances, enclosing palisades, middens, their houses and workshops within. A walk around a crannog would have enabled a person to experience and witness

the sights and smells of life on the island, ranging from the wood-smoke of fires, to the scent of cooking food or rotting bone in the middens.

Interpreting crannogs as early medieval island dwellings

In early medieval Ireland, the settlement or dwelling place (whether it be on a crannog, ringfort or unenclosed settlement) was a place of enormous social and ideological significance. While people spent much of their time moving around, working on the land, or engaged in various activities outside and around the landscape, the dwelling place and the house in particular was the place where they returned to in the evening. Within the dwelling enclosure or under the house's sheltering roof, the household group could have worked, slept, prepared and eaten food, gathered for particular social occasions and extended hospitality to their wider kin and neighbours. In the darkness of night or during the winter, people would have gathered together within the house itself to while away the hours around the fire. In summer too, it was the place where people rested after a day's labour, chatting idly about the weather, crops and local news.

There is a rich array of potential archaeological evidence for the interpretation of the organisation of settlement space in early medieval Ireland. Most studies of internal spaces of early medieval settlements have tended to be quite descriptive, outlining such formal morphological features as their enclosing features, size, construction techniques and architectural changes.⁴² Early medieval houses have been the subject of more detailed analytical studies and Lynn has developed a good understanding of their location, shape, size, building materials and internal features.⁴³ The early Irish historical sources also frequently have accounts of dwellings and houses and these indicate the paramount social and symbolic importance of such features as doorways, hearths and seating arrangements. However, even Lynn's studies have only briefly touched upon aspects of the social organisation of house spaces. In other words, it could be argued that the potential of neither the archaeological nor the historical evidence has been realised.

In contrast, prehistoric archaeologists have tended to make more advances in exploring the social and symbolic organisation of domestic space. Some of their major influences have been from anthropology and sociology. In particular, the sociologist, Anthony Giddens's theory of structuration and the French anthropologist, Pierre Bourdieu's

⁴² For example, Edwards, *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland*, pp 6-48.

⁴³ C.J. Lynn, 'Houses in rural Ireland, A.D. 500-1000' in *U.J.A.*, 57 (1994), pp 81-94; C.J. Lynn, 'Early medieval houses' in Michael Ryan (ed.), *The illustrated archaeology of Ireland* (Dublin, 1991), pp 126-31.

concepts of *habitus* have been very influential. Giddens's theories of *structuration* and *agency* envisage people as knowledgeable agents who have the ability to manipulate and structure the world within which they live, although they are constrained and guided by that world to that extent. Inspired by Giddens, archaeologists see the settlement space and the domestic house in particular not merely as a backdrop for human action, but as a space through which social relationships were ordered, produced and reproduced over time. A house's doors, hearth, furniture, sleeping, cooking and living areas would have been used, consciously or unconsciously, to control and direct the actions and movement of both household members and outsiders. Similarly, Bourdieu's concept of *habitus* describes how people, through their habitual, bodily encounters with space learn about society and their place in the world. For example, children growing up in a house would have learned from it, the nature of social relationships between men and women, between young and old, or between the upper and the lower social classes.

Archaeologists, inspired by these structuralist theories, have interpreted settlements and domestic architecture as embodying a system of signs about a culture's belief systems. The dwelling space and the house are seen as critically important in the negotiation of social relationships, as storehouse of traditional knowledge and values and as artefacts of both practical and symbolic action. In particular, archaeologists working with structuralist theory interpret domestic space as being divided up in a binary way, with structuralist oppositions between *bright/dark*, *front/back*, *clean/dirty*, *wet/dry*, *public/private* and *male/female*. These are all potentially rich topics to explore on an island dwelling, with its boundaries and boggy surfaces.⁴⁴ Inspired by these ideas, and recognising formal doorway orientations, hearth and furniture arrangements, working areas and routes of access around a crannog, as well as structured deposits of bone, artefacts or other rubbish on it, it should be possible to 'read' something of the cultural meanings expressed therein.

⁴⁴ Recent structuralist approaches to the social and symbolic organisation of domestic dwelling space mostly relate to Bronze Age and Iron Age Britain; Andrew Fitzpatrick, 'Outside in: the structure of an early Iron Age house at Dunstan park, Thatcham, Berkshire' in A. Fitzpatrick and E. Morris (eds.), *The Iron Age in Wessex: Recent work* (Oxford, 1994), pp 68-72; Richard Hingley, 'Public and private space: domestic organisation and gender relations amongst Iron Age and Romano-British households' in Ross Samson (ed.), *The social archaeology of houses* (Edinburgh, 1990), pp 125-48; A. Oswald, 'A doorway on the past: practical and mystic concerns in the orientation of roundhouse doorways' in A. Gwilt and C. Haselgrove (eds.), *Reconstructing Iron Age societies: new approaches to the British Iron Age* (Oxford, 1997), pp 87-95; Michael Parker-Pearson, 'Food, fertility and front doors in the first millennium BC' in T.C. Champion and J.R. Collis (eds.), *The Iron Age in Britain and Ireland: Recent trends* (Oxford, 1996), pp 117-32; Mel Giles and Michael Parker-Pearson, 'Learning to live in the Iron Age: dwelling and praxis' in Bill Bevan (ed.), *Northern exposure: interpretative devolution*

However, while early medieval scholars might now become interested in these structuralist approaches to settlement space, it is useful to point to the fact that many archaeologists have been quite critical of these theories. In particular, they suggest that there is a danger of proposing cross-cultural, ahistorical similarities between prehistoric and medieval uses of domestic space. It is important to recognise that the way that people construct, order and experience space is very much culturally and temporally determined, informed by a particular social ideology and is also an outcome of gender, age, social status and kinship. It is also important to remember that that individual settlements can develop in an idiosyncratic way across time, depending on the lives, events and processes experienced by the actual household who lived there.⁴⁵ However, there is certainly potential for working with some of these ideas in relation to early medieval crannogs. In this study, the architecture and internal space of early medieval crannogs (e.g. cairns, causeways, palisades, houses, hearths, cesspits, etc) will be interpreted in these social terms.

Place, memory and belonging

Landscapes and sites change across time. Early medieval crannogs have also then to be interpreted in terms of place, memory and history. It is important to consider how individual and collective memory would have worked in early medieval people's understanding of the settlement landscape. The past was used in various ways in the early Middle Ages, to legitimate the status quo, or to provide legitimacy to those to opposed the status quo, to understand current events and as a hugely significant means of building people's sense of identity. The community's shared sense of the past was used to define appropriate behaviour and to construct a local group identity (for example, the genealogy of the king, or accounts of past battles would have been narrated at public assemblies, thus re-enforcing local power structures). However, such views of the past would have been continually the subject of dialogue and debate, re-shaped to fit present needs, resisted and subverted by individuals and groups. Whatever people's agreement about the truth or otherwise of the past as presented, the past would still have been situated in a real, contemporary landscape, the more so if physical traces of it were visible. People would have known of an event that '*it happened on that island over there*', would have known from the black waterlogged timbers still surviving in the water that *people had lived there before*. A person's knowledge, sense of history and the past

and the Iron Age in Britain (Leicester, 1999), pp 217-31.

⁴⁵ For a recent critique of these structuralist approaches to house space see, Joanna Brück, 'Houses, life-cycles and deposition on Middle Bronze Age settlements in southern England' in *Proc. Prehist. Soc.* 65 (1999), pp 145-66.

then, would also have strongly influenced an understanding of the places that they were looking at, working in, or moving around.⁴⁶ In this study, the chronology and occupation histories of crannogs will be discussed in these terms.

People, islands and social identity

But this touches on another important aspect of this thesis: the role of islands in the making and re-shaping of social identity in the early Middle Ages. Identity is an important concern in settlement and landscape archaeology, because it reminds us that an people's perception and understanding of the landscape is usually shaped by both their community's and their own, 'ego-centred' viewpoint. Everybody who experienced and perceived the early medieval landscape did so according to his or her own knowledge, memory and individual identity. It would be useful then to explore how people thought about islands in the early Middle Ages. Were they places apart from the world, by living upon them did people similarly achieve a distinctive social identity, placing themselves apart from the world? Were islands places where people could alter or re-negotiate their social identities, whether this was in terms of social status, kinship or gender and sexuality?

In terms of social identity, while it might be thought useful to explore how an 'individual' might have experienced space, place and time in the early medieval landscape, it is worth reflecting on who this 'individual' was, as well as his or her place within the larger social group. It would not be helpful to adopt the perspective of an 'everyman', a 'neutral observer'. As stated above, most phenomenological studies of archaeological landscapes inevitably adopt the persona of the modern observer, unquestionably the product of modern, western society and culture.⁴⁷ Instead, it might be useful to attempt to reconstruct and imagine the *mentalités* of people living in an early medieval world (admittedly, a difficult task).

⁴⁶ Recent studies of memory and the uses of the past in early medieval societies include; Yitzhak Hen and Matthew Innes (eds.), *The uses of the past in the early Middle Ages* (Cambridge, 2000); Howard Williams, (ed.), *Archaeologies of remembrance: Death and memory in past societies* (New York, 2003); Howard Williams, 'Monuments and the past in early Anglo-Saxon England' in *World Archaeology* 30, no. 1 (1998), pp 90-108; S.T. Driscoll, 'Picts and prehistory: cultural resource management in early medieval Scotland' in *World Archaeology* 30, no. 1 (1998), pp 142-58; for studies of the perception and use of the past in early medieval Ireland, see Kim McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present in early Irish literature* (Maynooth, 1990), pp 65-83; N.B. Aitchison, *Armagh and the royal centres in early medieval Ireland* (Woodbridge, 1994), at pp 28-39; Conor Newman, 'Reflections on the making of a 'royal site' in early Ireland' in *World Archaeology* 30, no. 1 (1998), pp 127-141.

⁴⁷ Brück, 'In the footsteps of the ancestors', pp 23-36

Admittedly, there is much that is not achievable, because it is also important to remember that people's own social identity(s) would have had a profound impact on how they may have perceived islands and crannogs. It is probably impossible to reconstruct how everybody would have thought about a crannog. One could speculate, for example, that an early medieval serf or tenant when observing a high-status crannog from the shore, would have seen the thatched roofs and fire-smoke above the island's palisade, heard the chatter of voices, and would have felt excluded or oppressed by it. On the other hand, this same serf or tenant could have seen the crannog as a source of protection and safety, and as a place of power to be identified with. Somebody else, a visiting loyal noble perhaps, being brought across to the same island by dug-out boat, could have viewed close-up the richly worked timber of a palisade wall, could have entered through the narrow gap of an entrance, seen flickering firelight through a door, and felt that he was being accepted into a *élite* group. On the other hand, the same noble might have been nervous of his reception, aware of the social obligations and agreements shortly to be demanded of him. In any case, it would have been through such daily experiences and encounters with a crannog's location, physical architecture and social space and knowledge of its history, that a person would have understood his or her place in the community.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this chapter has explored the sources of evidence (archaeological, historical and palaeoenvironmental) that will be used in this study. It has also reviewed current understanding of settlement and landscape in early Ireland and the potential for innovative landscape approaches to this crannogs in particular. In the next chapter, I will explore how people *imagined and thought about islands* in the early Middle Ages. I will use this previously unexplored evidence to reconstruct how islands may then have been used in the social and cultural construction of identities, whether they be in terms of social class and status, gender, sexuality and age, ethnicity and kinship.

Chapter 4.

Islands and social identity in the early medieval imagination

Introduction

Islands inspire the imagination. An observer from the outside sees a distant island as seemingly floating on the water, remote, enigmatic, isolated. For the islander on the other hand, an island home provides safety and security, while the outside world can be seen in contrast as remote, overhanging and threatening. On small islands in particular, the islander can observe the water going all the way around his abode, can watch the wind and waves ruffle its surface and can see for great distances. For both outsider and observer then, islands are intensely bounded places, defined by their shorelines, the water all around them or the distance to the land. Islands then are places apart; whether they are distant or close at hand, and are removed both physically and cognitively from the rest of the world. However, islands are also places that invite movement and connection, the surrounding water providing a means of travel in all directions. Islands are also places in time and the island dweller can witness the passage of time by the weather, watching the tides, currents and winds at work. For these and other reasons, many cultures have seen islands as places whose unusual location in space and time gives them an extraordinary potential.

Before I explore how islands were seen in the early Middle Ages, it is worth briefly pointing out that many eras and cultures are suffused with powerful imagery about islands (including our own). In the late Middle Ages, Europe was fascinated with stories of *Hy Brasil* (*Uí Bhreasail* in Gaelic oral tradition), a mythical island and place of eternal life reputed to lie out in the Atlantic off the west coast of Ireland. It was frequently depicted on fourteenth to sixteenth century Portolan nautical maps, and survived as an anachronism on maritime charts as late as the nineteenth century.¹ In English and French seventeenth and eighteenth century colonialist literature, islands have also always been places of adventure and potential transformation. From Shakespeare's *The*

¹ T.J. Westropp, 'Brasil and the legendary islands of the North Atlantic' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 30c (1912), pp 223-60; T.J. Westropp, 'Early Italian maps of Ireland from 1300 to 1600, with notes on foreign settlers and trade' in *R.I.A. Proc.* 30c (1913), pp 361-428; J.H. Andrews, *Shapes of Ireland* (Dublin, 1966), Fig. 2.2; Aidan O'Sullivan, *Foragers, farmers and fishers in a coastal landscape: An intertidal archaeological survey of the Shannon estuary* (Dublin, 2001), Fig. 5.

Tempest, to Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* or Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, the island (in particular) is a place freed from the normal structures of life in the home country. In the colonial social and political experience, whether in the Pacific or the Caribbean, or even in seventeenth-century Ireland, islands were seen as remote, exotic, innocent, wild places that had to be tamed, charted and mapped by men. Once ready, these idealised spaces could then become the canvas on which new social and economic experiments could be tried out, resources freely exploited, fantasies enacted, wishes fulfilled, ambitions realised. The original inhabitants of islands, on the other hand, (themselves seen as the 'natural product' of these places) were often seen either as brutal savages, or innocent creatures, that should also be exploited and transformed by conquest and civilisation. In this sense, islanders were also seen as exotic, occasionally even noble, representing in their innocence, the state of grace from which the west had fallen.²

In more recent times, and closer to home, it is possible to trace similar colonialist/post-colonialist tropes in the treatment of islands by nineteenth and twentieth-century English and Irish scholars, poets, writers and artists. In J.M. Synge's essays on *The Aran Islands*, in W.B. Yeats's poetry, in Paul Henry's paintings on Achill Island, islanders are presented as innocents who preserved in their daily work and lives, a stoic tradition that offered an alternative to the norm.³ From about 1910, various folklorists, scholars and philologists seized on the Blasket Islands in particular as a place where they could encounter an alternative, proto-communist society, with its islander's lifeways, its socially agreed 'kingship', its communal sharing of property and resources and the islanders' heroic endurance of loss and hardship. In the British Marxist Hellenist George Thomson's accounts of the Blasket Islands and in Robin Flower's book *The Western Island*, a view is given of the islanders as people who represented an 'vanishing way of life'. Theirs was a culture 'on the verge of extinction – a society, which, though not illiterate, was still in an essentially oral stage and seemed to have retained impressive elements of a proto-historic, European culture'.⁴

Interestingly, in the 'Blasket Island literature' of Tomás Ó Criomhthain, Maurice O'Sullivan and Peig Sayers,⁵ the articulate voices of islanders themselves can be heard,

² Nikos Papastergiadis, *Dialogues in the diaspora: essays and conversations on cultural identity* (River Orams, 1998), p. 217.

³ Síghle Bhreathnach-Lynch, 'The formation of an Irish school of painting: Issues of national identity', in S.B. Kennedy *Paul Henry* (Dublin, 2003), pp 23-34.

⁴ G. D. Zimmerman, *The Irish storyteller* (Dublin, 2001), pp 357-67, at p. 363.

⁵ For a historical account and bibliography of the Blasket Island authors, see Muiris mac Conghail, *The Blaskets: people and literature* (Dublin, 1987), pp 127-47, and pp 168-69; the main memoirs in English translation are Tomas O'Crohan, *The Islandman* (Oxford, 1951); Maurice O'Sullivan,

albeit occasionally mediated through the assistance of their editors and friends. A striking aspect of this literature is the way that they, as islanders, perceived the outside world. In Tomás Ó Criomhthain's description of the Great Blasket, 'the sea goes all around it' and that was what separated them from the people of the mainland. Their brief excursions off the Blasket provided them with a journey to Dingle town or the Ballyferriter beach market, where they encountered the bizarre world of Ireland, with its unequal social hierarchies and money-oriented economy. For the islanders, this was *their* opportunity to encounter the 'other', and by indulging in strong drink, they could briefly move out from the tight social rules of the island.⁶ However, these incidents were anathema to Irish nationalists, who sought to erase in published editions any accounts of sexuality or alcohol, preferring to envision the islanders as pure and unadulterated.

It might be suggested that post-colonialist and nationalist attitudes to islands can be traced in the uses of the Blasket and Aran island literature in Irish education in the Free State. As Zimmerman has written:

Those who needed a perfect incarnation of Irishness hoped to find it in the islands of the West. The hardships of life there could be described in epic mode, and to go to those last outposts seemed to be a journey in time, back to the pure source. John Wilson Foster has shown how the old motif of imaginary islands as meeting-points for mortal men and immortal beings combined with memories of the medieval reality of islands as Irish monks' or hermits' refuges against pagan darkness and temptations, and with the modern philological reputation of the same islands as places where undefiled Irish was spoken: 'The western island came to represent Ireland's mythic unity before the chaos of conquest: there at once were the vestige and the symbolic unity of an undivided nation.'⁷

In the Irish school curriculum, the Blasket Island literature (particularly that of Peig Sayers) and the Aran Island short stories of Liam O'Flaherty and Mairtín Ó Direáin, were used to project a particular sense of Irishness.⁸ Certainly as a schoolboy in the early 1980s, I knew much more about Blasket Island and Aran Island life than I did about Dublin town life.⁹ Kiberd has argued that, through the use of Peig Sayers' book and other

Twenty years a-growing (Oxford, 1953); Peig Sayers, *Peig: the autobiography of Peig Sayers of the Great Blasket Island* (Áth Cliath, 1974).

⁶ Declan Kiberd, *Irish classics* (London, 2000), pp 520-42.

⁷ Zimmerman, *The Irish storyteller*, pp 360-1; Wilson Foster, 'Certain set apart: The western island in the Irish renaissance' in *Studies* 66 (1977), pp 261-70, at p. 265.

⁸ Indeed, the original publication of Tomás Ó Criomhthain's *An tOileánach* (Baile Átha Cliath, 1929) was an expurgated version, as the publishers removed any reference to sexuality or other vices, these being considered inappropriate for a Gaelic island race. The original, full edition was republished by his son in 1980. I thank John Bradley for this observation.

⁹ Unlike most of my compatriots, I never studied Peig Sayers' reflections of the Blasket Islands, so I never understood the source of their complaints. On the other hand, for my Leaving Certificate Irish, I studied islands through the marvellous short stories of Liam O'Flaherty and Mairtín Ó Direáin,

island narratives, the Irish education authorities intended that the 'real Irishness' of the smaller islands was to be imported back into Ireland, to re-generate and renew the bigger island and to again restore it to the state of grace from which it had fallen.¹⁰

In other words, since the Middle Ages, islands have carried the potential of being used to re-order and construct the world according to the agendas of ruling powers, while islanders themselves have often sought to subvert and resist such powers. In other words, islands have been used in an ideological sense, to present a view of the world that suited a particular elite or powerful group. Indeed, this is something that also happened in early medieval Ireland, as powerful clerics and kings attempted to shape the worlds in which they lived.

Islands and the early medieval imagination

Introduction

How were islands imagined in the early Middle Ages in Ireland and what sources of evidence can we use to answer this question? There is archaeology, of course, with its abundant evidence for the use of islands and crannogs. Undoubtedly, the physicality and material expression of cairns, palisades and causeways offer many insights into the ways that early medieval communities saw islands. Indeed, in the chapters subsequent to this, I will be concentrating on this archaeology. However, in this chapter I intend to concentrate on the early medieval documentary sources. The saints lives, annals and narrative literature all provide useful insights into the early Irish perception of islands and the ways that they were used to construct ideologically normative ideas of social hierarchy, gender and community. Indeed, it could be argued that these texts express concepts similar to the postcolonial ideas discussed above. Islands are seen as remote and isolated, the home of the 'other', places of innocence, danger and strangeness, where society could be turned upside-down or re-structured according to the ideological stance of the observer, who again is usually an outsider looking in.

The Irish annals, laconic accounts of deaths, battles and other phenomena, provide contemporary accounts of various political events from the seventh century onwards. In

which were mostly set on the Aran Islands.

¹⁰ Declan Kiberd, lecture at *TAG in Ireland* archaeology conference, UCD Dublin, December 2001; It certainly worked with me! As a 13-year old school boy, I first read Robin Flower's *The Western Island* (Oxford, 1944), and from there proceeded to devour the entire Blasket Island literature. I still remember my utter fascination with the Blaskets, and a summer visit I made there with my parents in 1983. Looking back, I think it's not entirely co-incidental that at the time I was also fascinated with other nationalist Irish iconography, such as the war of independence memoirs (e.g. those of Dan

the annals, there is a recurring sense that islands can be built, fortified and inhabited. The same islands can also be destroyed by fire, looted and sacked by raiders on boats and overwhelmed by winter storms and floods. These islands can also be places for treacherous murders, holding prisoners, feasting and the natural deaths of powerful individuals. Other potentially useful sources on the perception of islands are the saints' lives, both the earlier Hiberno-Latin versions and the later Irish examples. Saints are frequently portrayed as confronting various forces and individuals on islands. However, amongst the most significant sources of evidence are the *immrama* (literally 'rowings about') with their voyages around islands.¹¹ Some of the hagiographies (e.g. the seventh and eighth century Hiberno-Latin lives of Brendan and Ailbhe, and the later Irish lives of Sénan and Brendan) also provide episodes and motifs of journeys to islands similar to those in the *immrama*.¹²

In the past, scholars have tended to see both the hagiographies and voyage tales (and they undoubtedly influenced each other) as historical eyewitness accounts, passive reflections of daily life and beliefs, or as sources of information about maritime life.¹³ The frequently pagan encounters within them previously encouraged scholars to see them as having their origins in Irish 'Pre-Christian' or traditional lore.¹⁴ However, in recent years, most early Irish historians have argued that these tales were firmly written with a Christian *milieu* and must be understood in the context of the ideology of the eighth and ninth-century church (that of the *Céli Dé* reform movement, for example). It is interesting, for example, that the *immrama*, with their stories of pilgrimage into the western ocean are being compiled at the same time as some island hermitages (e.g. Aran Islands, Inishmurray) were emerging as significant *foci* of pilgrimage, a valuable source of income and authority for the church (Fig. 4.1).

Breen, Tom Barry), rebel songs and so on.

¹¹ For an anthology of the early medieval Irish voyage tales, see Wooding (ed.), *The otherworld voyage in early Irish literature*. Incidentally, before I embark on this discussion and leave behind modern Irish ideas about islands, I would also note that Robert Tracy, 'All them rocks in the sea: Ulysses as Immram' in *Irish University Review* 32, no. 2 (2002), pp 225-41, suggests that James Joyce being aware of the voyage tales through the Celtic literary revival, used them as a part inspiration for his novel describing Leopold Bloom's wandering around Dublin.

¹² Máire Herbert, 'Literary sea-voyages and early Munster historiography' in R. Black, W. Gillies and R. Ó Maolaigh (eds.), *Celtic connections: Proceedings of the tenth international congress of Celtic Studies* (East Linton, 1999), pp 182-9.

¹³ For a similar critique of scholars' misuse of the geography of Adomnán's *De locis sanctis* (written c.AD 680), see Thomas O'Loughlin, 'The view from Iona: Adomnán's mental maps' in *Peritia* 10 (1996), pp 98-122, at pp 99-101.

¹⁴ J.M. Wooding, 'Introduction' in Wooding (ed.), *The otherworld voyage*, pp. xi-xxviii, at p. xv.



Fig. 4.1 Early medieval island monastery of Inishmurray, Co. Sligo. While the monastery had churches, beehive cells, and *leachta*, it was also a significant destination for medieval pilgrims, who visited the island's hostels, public churches and saint's tomb. (Source: Peter Somerville Large, *Ireland's Islands: Landscape, life and legends* (Dublin, 2000), p. 47.

Principal amongst the *immrama* is the eighth-century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis* ('Voyage of St Brendan the Abbott', possibly written *c.* AD 800), which describes the travels of the sixth-century Brendan and some of his monks on a seven-year journey on the wide ocean, where they meet with marvellous islands, sea creatures and other wonders.¹⁵ Its popularity may have meant that it inspired in the early ninth century, the compilation of a secularised derivative tale in Irish, *Immram curaig Máele Dúin* ('The Voyage of Máel Dúin's boat'), which also describes a hero's journey around islands.¹⁶ Other notable voyage tales that have survived and received critical academic attention include the *Immram curaig Ua Corra* ('Voyage of the Uí Corra'),¹⁷ the *Immram Brain mac Febuil* ('Voyage of Bran son of Febul')¹⁸ and the *Immram*

¹⁵ Carl Selmer (ed.), *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* (Notre Dame, 1959; repr. Dublin 1989); J.J. O'Meara, (trans.) *The voyage of Saint Brendan* (Dublin 1976, reprint 1991); Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Distant islands', pp 1-20.

¹⁶ H.P.A. Oskamp (ed. and trans.), *The voyage of Máel Dúin: A study in early Irish voyage literature* (Groningen, 1970).

¹⁷ Whitley Stokes (ed. and trans.), 'The voyage of the Húi Corra' in *Revue Celtique* 14 (1893), pp 22-69.

¹⁸ Séamus Mac Mathúna (ed. and trans.), *Immram Brain: Bran's journey to the Land of Women* (Tübingen, 1985).

Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla ('Voyage of Snédgusand Mac Riagla').

Although the various voyage tales share many motifs and some are clearly derived from others (e.g. *Máele Dúin* being strongly influenced by the *Nauigatio*), each provides a distinctly different tale.¹⁹ In *Immram Brain mac Febuil*, Bran travels to the otherworld island of *Tír inna mBan* ('Land of women'), via another island named *Inis Subai* ('Island of Joy'). In *Immram curaig Máele Dúin* the secular hero, Máel Dúin, is the son of a warrior and nun and goes on an *Odyssey*-like quest²⁰ to avenge his father's murderers, visiting thirty-one islands before returning home in peace. In contrast, in *Immram Snédgusa ocus Maic Riagla*, two monks of the *familia* of St Columcille (Columba) visit eight islands, the last being *Tír Tairngire* ('Land of Promise'). The *Immram curaig Ua Corra* is distinctly different again. It describes the journey of three brothers on the ocean, they having set out it as a penance for crimes of brigandage.

In the *immrama*, people embark on journeys out to islands, negotiate dangers across the boundaries of sea and shore and encounter various beings of sacred (e.g. saints and hermits) or supernatural power (e.g. monsters, blacksmiths, angels). These voyage tales thus depict islands as places of the 'other', where magical personages, monsters and unnatural phenomena would be encountered.²¹ The islands they depict, whether they be Christian or pagan in tone, were often places that were literally closer to the Christian otherworld, serving as gateways to either heaven or hell. Islands could therefore also be places where various social boundaries could be negotiated, transgressed or crossed. For example, in terms of gender relations, on some mythical islands, sex was freely available to the wandering male (such as on the 'Land of women' in the ninth-century *Immram curaig Máele Dúin*), whilst on others it was rigorously denied (e.g. within a Christian island monastery).

Islands are also potentially located in an alternative time-geography in the hagiographies and voyage tales.²² Voyagers would go out onto the ocean, spend months or years rowing about various islands, meeting different people, before returning to Ireland, either much later than they expected. Quite apart from the different rhythm of hours as lived

¹⁹ Wooding, 'Introduction', p. xiii

²⁰ Incidentally, it is worth noting that the idea that the Irish *immrama* were based on classical texts has long been discredited by early Irish historians, see Wooding 'Introduction', p. xix.

²¹ For discussion of islands in the voyage tales, see Prionsias Mac Cana, 'The sinless otherworld of *Immram Brain*', pp 95-115; O'Loughlin, 'Distant islands', pp 1-20.

²² Examples of this alternative time-geography are cited by John Carey, 'Time, space and the otherworld' in *Proceedings of the Harvard Celtic Colloquium* 7 (1986-7), pp 1-27.

in an early medieval monastic world, or the different daily and seasonal rhythms of work amongst maritime and agricultural communities, time is actually depicted in an unusual (to us) way in the narrative literature and hagiographies. O'Loughlin observes that in a journey-narrative, we expect visits to places to follow each other in logical geographical sequence, over a logical chronological time frame. He suggests that time itself may have been perceived differently in the early Middle Ages than the way it is in the modern world which has a linear chronology and Newtonian sense of a proper sequence of days, weeks, months and years. In the early medieval texts, he states that we should be aware that people are representing time according to the way *they* understood it, not the way we do.²³ It is clear then that islands were seen as places outside of time, or even at the end of life, places where death or at least some type of afterlife, was close at hand. Thence, the early Irish *Tech Duinn*, ('house of Donn'), the island of death where people went to on their way to the otherworld was thought to be on an island in the western ocean.

In the early medieval imagination then, islands are depicted as places of potential transformation. In the voyage tales, the inhabitation of some islands, or at least a stay upon them for some time, could transform a person, or at least provide them with immense social power for their return to the mainland. Johnston has suggested that in the *immrama*, islands were seen as a counterpoint to Ireland, and that they represented symbols for the church of what Irish society should either achieve or avoid in future. Thence, the traveller would return to the mainland after these island encounters, renewed and spiritually ready to help the church to re-generate and renew a nation that had fallen from a state of grace.²⁴

Islands as places apart from, and at the centre of, the world

Introduction

The saints' lives and voyage tales often depict islands as remote, desolate places that are the refuge of a saint. On the other hand, other sources talk about these islands as places that were teeming with life and learning. Were islands remote, or were they places at the centre of the world? There is abundant archaeological evidence for the use of islands amongst early Christian monastic communities, both on the western ocean and in the lakelands of the Irish midlands. The traditional view of this phenomenon is that early Christian monks or *peregrini* in sixth-century Ireland, inspired by the followers of Saint Anthony and the Egyptian fathers, were seeking places for self-exile, retreat and

²³ O'Loughlin, 'The view from Iona', pp. 104-105.

²⁴ Elva Johnston, 'Borderlands in *Immram curaig Máile Dúin*', Lecture to UCD Dept. of History seminar, January 2003.

asceticism. Early Irish monks, embracing the *peregrinatio pro amore Dei* ('wandering exile for the love of God'), left their homelands for isolated places or foreign lands (e.g. Anglo-Saxon England, Merovingian France and Lombardic Italy). Others, seeking to emulate the desert fathers, turned to find a *desertum in ociano* ('desert in the ocean'), a remote island as a place of retreat, solitude and prayer.

Island monasticism was well established by the late sixth century, when St Columba left Ireland to establish a monastery on the island of Iona. In the seventh and eighth centuries, most of the islands of the Atlantic coastline of Ireland and Britain, in the Orkneys and Shetlands, further north into the Faroes and perhaps as far as Iceland were settled by monks. By the eighth and ninth centuries, some of these small island hermitages had evolved into larger monastic settlements, initially inspired perhaps by the church reform movement of the *Céli Dé*, but no doubt supported by the church's increasing political and economic power. In the ninth and tenth centuries, the popularity of pilgrimages to places like Skellig, Co. Kerry, Inismore, Co. Galway and Inishmurray, Co. Sligo²⁵ also led to their growing importance and they would have had relatively substantial populations (swelled no doubt on saints feast days and other religious festivals). These early medieval island settlements were enclosed within large stone walls, within which there were oratories devoted to the founding saints and their relics, cemeteries for men and women, public churches for masses and ceremonies, as well as hostels for the pilgrims who arrived to carry out the monastic *turas*, walking the boundaries of the island, visiting crosses, burials and *leachta* along the way.²⁶

Island monasteries are known from many places along the western coastline. Recently investigated early medieval sites in the southwest include those at Skellig Michael, Illauntannig, Illaunloughaun and Church Island, Co. Kerry.²⁷ The Aran Islands, Co. Galway were also centres of intense monastic activity, associated in legend with the sixth-century St. Enda who founded a monastery on Inishmore. Enda's monastic rule was one of 'great severity, a fierce regime of prayer, learning, austerity and mortification'.²⁸

²⁵ J. O'Sullivan, N. Connolly, D. Cotton and M. Heraughty, *Inishmurray: An island off County Sligo* Arch. Ire. Heritage Guide No. 18, (Dublin, 2002).

²⁶ Michael Herity, 'The antiquity of *an turas* (the pilgrimage round) in Ireland' in Michael Herity, *Studies of the layout, buildings and art in stone of early Irish monasteries* (London, 1995), pp 91-143.

²⁷ For a recent discussion of the context of these island hermitages, see Tomás Ó Carraigáin, 'A landscape converted: Archaeology and early church organisation on Iveragh and Dingle, Ireland' in Martin Carver (ed.), *The cross goes north: Processes of conversion in northern Europe, AD 300-1300* (York, 2003), pp 127-152.

²⁸ John Waddell, 'The archaeology of the Aran Islands' in J. Waddell, J.W. O'Connell and A. Korff, *The book of Aran* (Kinvara, 1994), pp 75-135.

The island has a large number of early monastic settlements, with stone oratories and churches, graveyards, bullaun stones, cross-slabs and pillars, holy wells and other structures.²⁹ On the Connemara coast, early medieval oratories, *leachta*, crosses and graves are also known from St. Macdara's Island, Chapel Island, Omev Island³⁰ and High Island (Ardoileán), Co. Galway. Recent archaeological and architectural investigations on High Island have revealed that along with a small monastic settlement of houses and churches within its substantial enclosure, the island also had a horizontal mill. This implies that the island had a reasonable monastic population who would have subsisted on a diet of cereal, vegetables and fresh fish.³¹ Most archaeological studies have tended to focus on one or other individual island (e.g. recent studies at Inishmurray, Co. Sligo, Skellig Michael, Co. Kerry and High Island, Co. Galway make little reference to neighbouring regions). Other studies have concentrated on particular aspects of the island's material culture (e.g. the ordering of space within monastic enclosures, church architecture or their decorated cross-slabs).³²

While there is a popular conception today of these island hermitages as remote and isolated (and many were), there were also other, more hard-headed factors involved, such as the anxiety to secure more land for the church, or to place churches along busy maritime routeways. It is probable that the islands functioned within the context of regional social, economic and political developments on the nearby mainland. Most would have been linked, for example, to the *paruchia* of important monasteries on the mainland.

Island monasteries were often established with the assistance of local secular rulers, as honour and status would be due to those communities or families who sustained and supported an ideal monastic life. Indeed, it has recently been suggested that some island monasteries may have been provided with both their islands and their stone enclosures by secular patrons. A statistical and architectural analysis of the stone enclosures on Illauntannig, High Island, and Inismurray suggests that they were originally secular

²⁹ Gosling, *West Galway*, pp 89-112.

³⁰ Tadhg O'Keefe, 'Omev and the sands of time' in *Arch. Ire.* 28, (1994), pp 14-17.

³¹ C. Rynne, G. Rourke and J.W. Marshall, 'An early medieval monastic watermill on High Island' in *Arch. Ire.*, 37 (1996), pp 24-7; Georgina Scally, 'The early monastery of High Island', *Arch. Ire.*, 47 (1999), pp 24-8; J.W. Marshall and G.D. Rourke, *High Island: An Irish monastery in the Atlantic* (Dublin, 2000).

³² Michael Herity, 'The layout of Irish early Christian monasteries' in Proinsias Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.) *Ireland und Europa: Die Kirche in frühmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1984), pp 105-16.

enclosures that had been given to the church by a local king or noble.³³

It is well-known from the saints lives that kings and ruling families customarily gave property, cattle, land and enclosures to the church for reasons of piety or in exchange for miracles performed on behalf of the family, or because a family member had joined the monastic community. Kings would offer their fortresses to the saint, or even occasionally grant him an entire island. According to legend, St. Columba was probably given the island of Iona by Conall mac Comgaill of the Scottish Dál Riata. In the *Betha Mochuda*,³⁴ the *Life* of St. Mochuda of Lismore, the king of Munster, in gratitude for having been healed by the saint, grants islands to Mochuda:

Extensive lands to God and Mochuda for, scil: Oilean Cahtail and Rose-Beg and Ros-More and Inis-Pice...Mochuda himself commenced to build a church on Inis-ic and he remained there for a whole year...That island we have mentioned scil:-Inish-Pic, is a most holy place in which an exceedingly devout community constantly dwell.

In some saints' lives, there is also evidence that early medieval crannogs were being granted to the church, and that these islands were being provided to the church free of tribute or taxes in perpetuity. Although this would be the normal basis of a donation to the church, it has not been previously noted that crannogs were involved in these negotiations. In the probable tenth-century *Life* of Mochua of Balla it is said that Cenn Fáelad mac Colgan (obit AD 682) of the Uí Briúin Seóla (the later O'Flahertys), a less successful branch of the Uí Briúin of Connacht, surrendered himself and his son and his grandson in bondage to the saint and freed the island of Loch Cime (a crannog on Lough Hackett, near Headford, Co. Galway) from tribute: *7 tuc hé féin 7 a mac 7 a úa a ndaeiri dhó, 7 inn inis de shoerad, 7 ro soerad iarsin*.³⁵ This happened after the saint caused the island to be submerged in a storm. Doherty suggests that this land grant was actually made by Cléirchén, king of Uí Briúin Seola in the late ninth/early tenth century.³⁶

Local secular communities thereafter probably supported the island monks by providing them with agricultural tools, food and clothing. On the tiny early medieval island hermitage of Illaunloughaun, off Valentia Island, Co. Kerry, there was extensive use of maritime resources, but also of cereals, cattle, sheep and pig. Faunal studies suggest that

³³ Marshall and Rourke, *High Island*, pp 164-73.

³⁴ Quoted in Marshall and Rourke, *High Island*, p. 175.

³⁵ Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, 1. 43.4796.

³⁶ Doherty, 'Some aspects of hagiography as a source for Irish economic history', p. 310.

young calves were slaughtered as part of the dairying economy and given to the monks as provisioning of the island, perhaps as tribute or food-rent.³⁷ If early medieval crannogs were used as island hermitages in the midlands, then it would be expected that similar provisioning arrangements were in place.

In early medieval writings, it is possible to glean a sense of how islands were perceived in contemporary 'mental maps'.³⁸ In early Christian writings, the islands of Britain and Ireland were seen as places almost at the end of the earth, far from the homeland of Christianity.³⁹ The ocean surrounding these islands was seen as a mighty and mysterious abyss, a place of peculiar phenomena (e.g. tides), an abode of monsters (such as the whale, Leviathan) and demons. Thus, a monastery on one of its islands was seen as being on the frontline in the Godly war against demons.⁴⁰ On the other hand, a monk standing on the monastic island of Iona, for example, would, of course, have had his own island-centred, practical understanding of the world.⁴¹

So, when a monk stood on Iona facing south-east, he would have imagined that – once he had crossed two short areas of water (from Iona to Britain, and from Britain to Gaul, both trips frequently and easily made) – ahead of him was a vast land-mass stretching on to Jerusalem and then out to the Asiatic coast of the same ocean he was looking at. While to his back the Ocean stretched an equal distance: an impassable body of water heaving and tossing without interruption.⁴²

Indeed, the seventh-century *Vitae Columbae* provides an immense amount of detail on the busy work and routines of island life around Iona.⁴³ The community saw themselves as living on Iona, as well as the various other islands that made up the monastery, between Britain and the northern ocean. There are descriptions of voyages to and from Ireland, to Skye and the Orcades (Orkney or the Shetlands, or both), and to Britain and Gaul. There are shorter trips too around the local islands, under sail and by rowing. The monastic community was familiar with the ocean, with its tides, whirlpools and currents, there are storms to contend with and shipwreck was always a danger. It is worth remembering that the early medieval occupation of island hermitages, and later

³⁷ J.W. Marshall and Claire Walsh, 'Illaunloghan: life and death on a small monastic site' in *Arch. Ire.*, 30 (1998), pp 24-8; Emily Murray, 'Early evidence for coastal exploitation in Ireland'. Unpublished PhD thesis (Queen's University, Belfast, 1999), pp 230-57, p. 426.

³⁸ O'Loughlin, 'The view from Iona', p. 106.

³⁹ David Howlett, 'Dicuill on the islands of the north' in *Peritia* 13 (1999), pp 127-34.

⁴⁰ Thomas O'Loughlin, 'Living in the ocean' in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *Studies in the cult of Saint Columba* (Dublin, 1996), pp 11-23.

⁴¹ O'Loughlin, 'The view from Iona'. pp 98-122.

⁴² O'Loughlin, 'Living in the ocean', p. 17.

⁴³ A.O. Anderson and M.O. Anderson (ed. and trans.), *Adomnán's Life of Columba* (London, 1961, revised M. Anderson, Oxford 1991).

pilgrimages to islands, is a phenomenon that is by no means limited to the Atlantic coastline. Early medieval monastic sites are also known on the islands of the western lakes, such as on Church Island (Lough Currane), Co. Kerry, on the islands of Lough Corrib. Several of the midlands lakes have island monasteries too, such as those on Lough Derg (e.g. Iniscealtra), Lough Ree (e.g. Inisbofin, Inchcleraun) and on the various islands of Lough Erne (e.g. White Island, Devenish), Co. Fermanagh.⁴⁴ In terms of the perception and the role of islands in early monasticism, it is interesting to note that crannogs were occasionally constructed adjacent to larger monastic islands. Although these have not been previously noted by archaeologists, I have identified some small crannog-like islets immediately off the shores of Devenish Island, Co. Fermanagh, beside the island of St. Mogue's church, on Templeport Lough, Co. Cavan⁴⁵ and beside Iniscealtra, Co. Tipperary.⁴⁶ Indeed, it is worth raising the point here that some of the tiny maritime island hermitages, such as those on Church Island and Illaunloughaun, Co. Kerry (both off Valentia Island), are themselves hardly much larger than a crannog (Fig. 4.2).



Fig. 4.2 Early medieval island hermitage on Church Island, Ballycarbery West, off Valentia Island, Co. Kerry, with its beehive hut, oratory and burials inside a stone enclosure. Some of these small island hermitages were hardly larger than a midlands crannog (Source: A. O'Sullivan and J. Sheehan *The Iveragh Peninsula: An archaeological survey of south Kerry* (Cork, 1996), p. 254, 257, Pl. XVIII).

⁴⁴ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 147-9.

⁴⁵ O'Donovan, *Cavan*, p. 205, Fig. 40; This is a small circular crannog just offshore of the natural island that the medieval church is located upon.

⁴⁶ There was a crannog on the River Shannon floodplain beside the early medieval monastic site of Clonmacnoise, Co. Offaly. When it was ploughed out in the 1950s, finds included oak timbers and an early medieval iron tongs; Caimin O'Brien and P.D. Sweetman, *Archaeological inventory of County Offaly* (Dublin, 1997), p. 18.

The presence of church metalwork associated with early liturgical rituals on many Irish midland crannogs also raises questions about the use of these islands by the church. A damaged eighth-century processional cross was found beside a crannog at Tully Lough, Co. Roscommon.⁴⁷ An intricately decorated bronze sieve, possibly a wine strainer used in the early mass, dated to between the eighth to ninth century AD was found on Moylurg crannog, Co. Antrim. Two tenth century ecclesiastical handbells were found in the water off School Boy Island crannog, on Lough Ennell, beside the early monastic site of Lynn, Co. Westmeath, while an early ninth-century bronze bell and an eighth to ninth century bronze basin was found during the nineteenth century on Castle Island crannog on Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath.⁴⁸ Previous interpretations have suggested that such crannogs were used as places for storing church metalwork at times of danger (i.e. Viking raids).

However, it is also possible that some of these crannogs may in fact have been early medieval hermitages or 'shrine islands' where precious relics were stored and venerated by their church owners, occasionally taken off the island for use in rituals. It is possible that one of the crannogs on Lough Kinale, Co. Longford was one of these early medieval hermitages or shrine islands. In the 1980s, a disassembled eighth-century bookshrine was recovered from shallow water beside Toneymore crannog, Lough Kinale, while a medieval silver chalice and paten was also taken from beside Ballywillin crannog, also on Lough Kinale, Co. Longford.⁴⁹ It is interesting then that the *Annals of Ulster* for AD 823 refers to the death of one bishop Sechnasach of Loch Cendin (i.e. Lough Kinale, Co. Longford), using a topographical reference to denote who he was, much like the frequent associations between early medieval kings and lakes: The annals reads as follows:

AD 823

Sechnasach of Loch Cendin, bishop and anchorite, rested.⁵⁰

While it may well be that this refers to a church in the vicinity of the lake, it is also possible that one of the crannogs on the lake was 'owned' and used by the church, perhaps having been granted to it by a local secular authority.

⁴⁷ E.P. Kelly, 'Protecting Ireland's archaeological heritage', pp 213-25; E.P. Kelly, 'The Tully Lough cross' in *Arch. Ire.*, 64 (2003), pp 9-10.

⁴⁸ Cormac Bourke, 'Early Irish hand-bells' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 110 (1980), pp 52-66.

⁴⁹ E.P. Kelly, 'Treasure-hunting in Ireland - its rise and fall', pp. 378-381; E.P. Kelly 'The Lough Kinale book-shrine', pp. 168-174; Farrell, *et al.*, 'The crannóg archaeological project (CAP), Republic of Ireland I', pp 123-136.

Islands and otherworldly encounters

Islands in the early medieval texts, whether they be Christian or pagan islands, were often depicted as places that were literally closer to the otherworld, serving as gateways to either heaven or hell. In early Irish literature, the otherworld is depicted as being in various places, on islands on lakes or off the coast, underneath lakes, rivers and the sea, beneath hills and burial mounds, or in dwellings hidden by darkness, storms or mist.⁵¹ The otherworld could also be accessed through royal dwellings (perhaps even through royal crannogs).⁵² However the location of the otherworld was both ambiguous and paradoxical. Firstly, in terms of its geography, this seemingly distant, usually inaccessible otherworld was to be encountered at local, everyday places. Secondly, in terms of time, the days, months and years spent there passed either slower or faster than those spent in the present world. In other words, this was a place apart, where alternatives could be expected.

Scholars have interpreted the otherworldly aspects of the saints lives, narrative literature and poetry in various ways. Some have suggested that these are relics of pagan belief that are preserved within the archaic, conservative system of secular learning in early Irish society in the seventh and eighth century. More recently, other scholars have proposed that these narratives are firmly based on well-known classical traditions, Christian beliefs and native lore, and that they are being concocted for profoundly contemporary ideological purposes (i.e. projecting the power of the church, etc). In any case, it is possible to view the concept of the otherworld as an active ideological use of past traditions within a Christian community. Carey has suggested that beliefs about the otherworld played a significant role in early Irish society, serving to link the past (and the dead) with the present, and using it as a source of values and authority to be utilised at public gatherings and assemblies. For example, he suggests that the frequent holding of the *oenach* at places redolent of death (burial mounds, etc) was an intentional act so as to link the public gathering with the dead and the otherworld.⁵³

⁵⁰ *A.U.* 823.3; Edmund Hogan, *Onomasticon Godelicum* (Dublin, 1910, reprint 2000), p. 496.

⁵¹ In the late Middle Ages, it was believed that the pilgrimage island of Lough Derg, Co. Donegal had a cave on it which was the gateway to hell, in this case, the otherworld was accessed by means of a cave on an island.

⁵² For discussions of the otherworld and Christianity in early medieval Ireland; John Carey, 'The location of the otherworld in Irish tradition' in *Éigse*, 19 (1982), pp 36-43; Carey, 'Time, space and the otherworld', pp 1-27; John Carey, 'The Irish 'otherworld': Hiberno-Latin perspectives' in *Éigse*, 25 (1991), pp 154-9; Liam MacMathúna, 'The Christianization of the early Irish cosmos?: *muir mas, nem nglas, talam cé* (Blathm. 258)' in *Z.C.P.*, 49-50 (1997), pp 532-47.

Islands, lakes and otherworldly monsters

Islands and lakes were often projected in the early medieval texts as places where powerful individuals (heroes, saints and kings) would confront otherworldly forces or monsters, to the benefit of the wider community. Islands were also often seen as the abode of malicious spirits, monsters or otherworldly beings, all located at the edge of the community.

There is a strong tradition of kingdoms underwater.⁵⁴ In the ninth-century *echtra* or adventure tale, 'The adventure of Laeghaire son of Crimhthann to Magh Mell', the hero Loegaire, son of the king of Connacht passes through the water of Énloch, in Magh Aí, to get to the otherworld realm of the plains of Mag dá Chéo, where he battles with otherworldly warriors.⁵⁵ Battles can also be fought with otherworldly monsters.⁵⁶ In the eighth-century 'The saga of Fergus mac Léti', Fergus the king of Ulster breaks his *geis* by swimming in Loch Rudraige (the modern sea-lough of Dundrum Bay, Co. Down), within his own kingdom. He encounters an underwater monster that leaves him with a fearful facial blemish that threatens his kingship (a king had to be physically perfect). In the end, he has to dive under the waves of Loch Rudraige to fight and kill the monster, leaving the waters red with blood, before he dies himself (but he has redeemed his kingship).⁵⁷ Indeed, this is a story that recalls many aspects of the Anglo-Saxon *Beowulf*, the hero of which also fights with a hideous monster in a lake.

Saints also encounter and defeat monsters in lakes. In the ninth-century *Life of Colman Ela*, the saint defeats a water monster dwelling in Loch Ela (Lynally in the territory of Fir Cell, southwest of Tullamore, Co. Offaly). He does this because he has heard that the king of Fir Cell would provide him with a place for his church if he succeeds in killing the monster. With God's assistance, he binds the monster in the lake's reeds so that two saints accompanying him can kill it. In terms of gender relations, it is worth noting that

⁵³ Carey, 'Time, space and the otherworld', pp 14-5.

⁵⁴ For a recent review of an early medieval legend of a saint's church under the sea off the Shannon estuary, see Máire Herbert, 'The legend of St Scothíne: perspectives from early Christian Ireland' in *Studia Hibernica* 31 (2000-2001), pp 27-34.

⁵⁵ Kenneth Jackson (ed. and trans.), 'The adventure of Laeghaire Mac Crimhthainn' in *Speculum* 17 (1942), pp 377-89; He (in note 1) identifies this lake as a place later known as Loch na nÉn ('lake of the birds'). Hogan, *Onomasticon Godelicum*, p. 503 identifies that lake as Loughnaneane, Co. Roscommon. Interestingly, archaeological survey has identified a significant and possibly royal crannog (of the O'Connors) in this lake; John Bradley and Noel Dunne, 'A crannog at Loughnaneane, Roscommon town' in *Roscommon Hist. Archaeol. Soc. Jn.* 3 (1990), pp 34-6.

⁵⁶ While monsters are often serpent-like creatures, another manifestation of them is the water-bull in the sea who emerges from time to time onto the shore; Bernhard Maier, 'Beasts from the deep: the water-bull in Celtic, Germanic and Balto-Slavonic traditions' in *Z.C.P.*, 51 (1999), pp 4-16.

⁵⁷ D.A. Binchy (ed. and trans.), 'The saga of Fergus mac Léti' in *Ériu*, 16 (1952), pp 33-48.

the monster is of a female form. The *Life* states that ‘...this was the description of the monster – a small pointed gaping apparition in the shape of a woman’, (*Ocus ba hi so tuarusccbáil na peiste .i. fuad becc biorach bel-sgaeilte I ndeilb mna*). In a sense, this victory of a male saint over a female monster might be metaphorical for the victory of the church over the sexual temptations of females in general. Thereafter, the saint goes to Land Ela and builds a fortified house on an island in the marsh (*Ocus doroine dún-árus innte*) and builds a causeway out to it. It is possible that this was a crannog.⁵⁸

Similarly, in the tenth-century *Life* of Mochua of Balla, Mochua comes to Lough Cime (Lough Hackett, Co. Galway), at a time when the king is hunting deer along the lakeshore (Fig. 4.3). The deer takes shelter on a rocky island in the lake. The king’s men are afraid to go out to this island because of their fear of a monster living in the lake, but the saint protects one of the warriors and saves him from death when the monster swallows him.⁵⁹



Fig. 4.3 Early medieval crannog on Lough Hackett, Co. Galway, probably a royal site. This island is the venue for various supernatural encounters in the tenth-century *Life* of Mochua of Balla and the *Annals of the Four Masters* states that it was damaged by a storm in AD 990. (Source: O. Alcock, K. de hÓra and P. Gosling, *Archaeological inventory of County Galway. Vol. II: North Galway* (Dublin, 1999), Pl. IIIa, p. 119).

⁵⁸ Plummer (ed. and trans.), *Bethada Náem nÉrenn: Lives of Irish saints*, vol. II, pp 162-176, at pp 162-66.

⁵⁹ Stokes (ed. and trans.), *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, 1.4709-21, pp 284-5.

What was the ideological intention of these stories? A modern folklorist would interpret these encounters with otherworldly monsters as cautionary stories about appropriate behaviour in a dangerous watery environment (danger of death from drowning), while also providing for the community a normative or moralistic view of sexuality, greed and courage.⁶⁰ However, the stories may have had an added social or ideological role. They may have been intended to remind the listener that in a world of peril, one's friends (i.e. kings and saints) could save one from the unfriendly powers of nature.

It is also worth remembering that these stories are mediated through the hagiographer's pen. It is possible that they were originally local folktales and stories about people who had succeeded in struggles against watery monsters. In the Middle Ages, they may have been deliberately adapted by the writers of the saints' lives to portray the saint as the real hero, while at the same time embedding the saint into local oral narratives. If this is true, then in appropriating local folktales, the hagiographers may also have been effectively transforming these stories from pagan tales to ones with a Christian message, while also at the same time promoting the notion of the church as the real protecting power.

Islands, death and immortality

Islands are places surrounded by water, making them difficult to reach, or to leave – both for people and otherworldly beings. They are also seen as places of transition into alternative lives. In early medieval literature, islands are also occasionally associated with death, and the dead are of course yet another category of person moving towards the margins of the community. This is particularly true of the various mythical islands situated to the west of Ireland, on the ocean where the sun set at the end of the day. The association between islands and the dead may be an early one. Ó hÓgáin has tentatively linked the Irish 'island of the dead' with the second-century writings of Plutarch, who refers to a deity living in a sleepy state on an island off the land to the west of Britain. He refers to him using the Greek name of the god of the dead, Cronus, and also accounts for fishermen hearing strange boats travelling to a distant place where the names of those who disembarked were called out. Similarly, the sixth-century Byzantine writer, Procopius, described how the people of the Breton peninsula conducted the souls of the dead to an island to the west, after hearing voices in the night calling them down to the shore where boats laden with the dead were found.⁶¹

⁶⁰ P. Lysaght, S. Ó Catháin and D. Ó hÓgáin (eds.), *Islanders and water-dwellers* (Dublin, 1999).

⁶¹ Daithí Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, legend and romance: an encyclopaedia of the Irish folk tradition* (New York, 1991), p. 165; Procopius, *Gothic War* viii xx, 45-49; cited in Myles Dillon and Nora



Fig. 4.4. The early medieval island of the dead, *Tech Donn*, known today as Bull Rock, the furthest island (to the right), off Dursey Island, Beara Peninsula, Co. Cork. In early Irish literature dating from the ninth to the twelfth century, this island was viewed as the place ‘where the dead assemble’, *co tech nDuind frisndálait mairb*. (Source: Peter Somerville Large, *Ireland’s Islands: Landscape, life and legends* (Dublin, 2000), p. 105.

In early medieval Irish literature and recent folklore, there is an aloof figure known as *Donn* (deriving from the Irish adjective *donn*, meaning ‘dark’). *Donn* is commonly represented as a pre-Christian god of death, a manifestation of the *Daghdha*, the great Celtic ancestor deity and Lord of the Otherworld, but it may be more complicated.⁶² In any case, *Donn* is perennially associated with the shadowy world of the dead, but he was also reckoned to be an ancestor figure of all those who die (in other words, all mortals).⁶³ Thence he bids his descendents, the people of Ireland, to come to his house when they die, *co tech nDuind frisndálait mairb* (‘to the house of Donn where the dead have their tryst’).⁶⁴ In various early medieval sources, from the ninth to the twelfth

Chadwick, *The Celtic realms* (London, 1967), p. 136.

⁶² It has recently been suggested that the legend of Donn and his island abode in southwest Ireland relates to concepts of the southwest as a liminal region of death/darkness, originating in Bronze Age and Iron Age belief systems and burial practices; William O’Brien, ‘Megaliths in a mythologised landscape: South-west Ireland in the Iron Age’ in Chris Scarre (ed.), *Monuments and landscape in Atlantic Europe: Perception and society during the Neolithic and Early Bronze Age* (London and New York, 2002), pp 152-76.

⁶³ Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, legend and romance*, p. 165;

⁶⁴ Prionsias MacCana, *Celtic mythology* (Feltham, 1984), pp 36-7.

century, his house is known as *Tech Duinn* and is depicted as the place 'where the dead assemble'. Deceased people are described as travelling to and from his house. *Tech Duinn* was usually regarded as an island off the southwest coast of Ireland. The island reckoned to be it in modern tradition is known today as Bull Rock, off Dursey Island, Co. Cork - a 'steep, bare, grim-looking rock-island, looming up among the Atlantic breakers like an outpost' (Fig. 4.4).⁶⁵

Islands are of course also seen as the venues for various other types of otherworld or afterlife existence, for example the *Tír na nÓg* ('land of everlasting youth') of the literature and the sinless otherworlds of the voyage tales.⁶⁶ Carey has suggested that this idea of islands across the sea as places of the otherworld is a concept that only develops towards the end of the early Middle Ages, although this is certainly not universally accepted.⁶⁷ In any case, there was also a folklore association between islands, death and immortality in the midlands in the late Middle Ages. In the late eleventh-century *Versus sancti Patricii episcopi* ('the writings of the holy Bishop Patrick'), there is a description of one 'wonderful island' (i.e. *de insula quadam satis admiranda*)

There is also in our country a small wonderful island (*mirabilis insula parua*),
Which is shunned by all female birds, nor will they approach it:
They are unable to touch its holy ground
Or its boughs: but birds of male sex can visit it.
Here in this strange division birds follow the ways of men.
No sinner can die there nor there be buried,
But those only who lawfully may rise by their merits
To Heaven, as is often proved by many examples.⁶⁸

Giraldus Cambrensis writing in the twelfth-century *Topographia Hiberniae* also describes two marvellous monastic islands (probably the same as above) in a lake (probably Loch Cré, or Mona Incha, near Roscrea, Co. Tipperary) in north Munster. Women (or indeed, any female animals or birds) could not enter the larger island without dying, while people entering the smaller islands could not die a natural death. He also describes an island in the sea to the west of Connacht, consecrated by Saint Brendan, where corpses did not putrefy, so that people could recognise their own ancestors lying out in the open.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Käte Müller-Lisowski, 'Contributions to a study on Irish folklore' in *Béaloides*, 18 (1948), pp 142-99; Käte Müller-Lisowski, 'Donn Firinne, Tech Duin, an Tarbh' in *Études Celtiques*, 6 (1953-54), pp 21-9.

⁶⁶ For example, Mac Cana, 'The sinless otherworld of Imram Brain', pp 95-115.

⁶⁷ Carey, 'The location of the otherworld', pp. 118-9.

⁶⁸ Aubrey Gwynn, (ed. and trans.) *The writings of Bishop Patrick 1074-1084*. (Dublin, 1955), 1148-155.

⁶⁹ J.J. O'Meara (ed. and trans.) *Giraldus Cambrensis: The history and topography of Ireland*

Interestingly, islands were frequently used as burial places by the early medieval peoples of Ireland and western Britain. Along the Atlantic sea-board of Ireland, island hermitages such as Skellig Michael, Church Island, Illaunloughan, Co. Kerry, Inishmore, High Island and Omev Island, Co. Galway and Inismurray, Co. Sligo have all produced archaeological evidence for burials and cemeteries associated with churches. On some islands, such as Omev Island, there is little other evidence for contemporary settlement suggesting that corpses were brought there from the mainland for burial.⁷⁰ Islands are also associated with the burials of saints. Both Inis Chonáin – Saint Conan’s Island – in Loch Awe, Scotland, and the Welsh island of Bardsey Island have reputations for the large numbers of saints buried in their soil. Similarly, so numerous were the number of saints associated with Enda and Inishmore (Aran Islands, Co. Galway) that the twelfth-century *Life* of St. Ailbhe asserted that ‘No-one but God alone knows the number of saints buried there’.⁷¹ Local legend has it that no fewer than 120 saints are buried in his monastery near Killeany.⁷² Islands are occasionally seen as burial places for early medieval kings in Scotland. The Isle of Lismore off the Benderloch coast in Scotland was reputedly used as the exclusive burial place for the early Pictish kings of the region, while Iona was also used throughout the Middle Ages as a burial place for Scottish kings. It is intriguing too that human remains, in the form of skeletons, skulls and other bone fragments have been found on early medieval crannogs, such as Lagore, Cloonfinlough, Ardakillen and Killyvilla Lake (see Chapter 7 below).

Islands, negotiating boundaries, edges and liminalities

Introduction

In early medieval literature, islands were often seen as *in-between places*, liminally located on significant social and spiritual boundaries. Islands may therefore have been places where the boundaries of social identity could be negotiated, transgressed or crossed. Travel to an island, whether to a crannog by boat or causeway, or to an island out at sea, often involved some level of risk in crossing that boundary. However, the risk was not only a physical one. In the early Irish sources, islands were often seen as locations where some significant spiritual dangers could be encountered, and if survived a

(Mountrath, 1982, revised ed.), pp 60-1.

⁷⁰ O’Keeffe, ‘Omev and the sands of time’, pp. 5-17; These excavations produced at least 129 burials of men, women and children, many associated with a potentially Iron Age/early medieval transition rectangular enclosure. Omev is reputed to have been founded by the seventh-century Feichín of Fore, Co. Westmeath, near Lough Lene.

⁷¹ Marshall and Rourke, *High Island*, p. 4.

⁷² Waddell, ‘The archaeology of the Aran Islands’, p. 106.

transformation of the self might be expected.

In reality of course, islands *are* on real boundaries. They are surrounded by water and passage to them would have required the early medieval traveller to negotiate depths and rocky shallows, currents, tides, winds and swells. Indeed, even the moment of landing on an island involved the negotiation of treacherous surf and waves (e.g. witness the impossibility of landing on Skellig Michael on a breezy day). It is unsurprising then that the water and the shore itself were often seen as a symbolic boundary, both in the literature and in reality. For the early medieval monastic inhabitants of the island of Iona, the *strait of water* between it and the mainland (i.e. the 'Sound of Iona'), was a significant boundary that protected the community, regulating access to the island, both physically, symbolically and spiritually. Interestingly, the *shoreline* of that monastic island was also a significant topographical feature. MacDonald has suggested from an analysis of Adomnán's *Life of Columba* that the island of Iona was enclosed within a triple boundary that delimited and defined its monastic settlement and farmland as a sacred space. He argues that the outermost boundary was the actual shoreline of the island rather than any bank or ditch, while the island's boat harbour was seen as its outer gate.⁷³ Similarly, in the *Life of Saint Senán*, the king of the Uí Fidgente when visiting the saint on his island of Inis Cathaig, on the Shannon estuary, waits at the 'port' of the island ('the king himself came, and waited in the port of the island, for he durst not go from the port without Senán's permission').⁷⁴ In other words, the harbour on the island was the primary entrance across the boundary and into the sacred space of the island.

It has already been suggested that in the early medieval literature, islands were places where significant transformations of the self might be expected. It is evident then that enclosing water could also be a space or medium within which such personal transformations could be expected. In general, water features as a powerful medium of symbolic transformation in early Irish sources, as well as in diverse other Christian texts and commentaries. In the saints' lives, Irish saints are frequently depicted as immersing themselves in water as part of their asceticism, thus recalling Christ's baptism in the Jordan. Saints would also often stand and pray while immersed in freezing cold water, thus approaching God in their suffering.⁷⁵ For example, in Muirchú's *Life of St. Patrick*

⁷³ Aidan MacDonald, 'Aspects of the monastic landscape in Adomnán's *Life of Columba*' in John Carey, Máire Herbert and Pádraig Ó Riain (eds.), *Studies in Irish hagiography. Saints and scholars* (Dublin, 2001), pp 15-30, especially pp 15-18.

⁷⁴ Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, l. 2350, p. 217.

⁷⁵ Colin Ireland, 'Penance and prayer in water: an Irish practice in Northumbrian hagiography' in *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies*, 34 (1997), pp 51-66; Kay Muhr, 'Watery imagery in early Irish'

(written c.680), Saint Patrick and Benignus stand in a river while praying, the heat of the saint's spiritual ardour raising its temperature to an uncomfortable level.⁷⁶ While it is rare that secular individuals are depicted as immersing themselves in water for religious reasons, they certainly did so for another reason. In the early Irish sources a premium is placed on cleanliness and personal hygiene, so that bathing was socially quite important. Indeed, the provision of facilities for bathing and washing and was a key aspect of early Irish hospitality (along with food). It is worth remarking that a crannog or island in a lake is a place that is unusually close to such bathing facilities.⁷⁷

Islands, journeys, movement and arrival

Introduction

In the early medieval imagination, a journey was often seen as a metaphor for personal transformation and change. In particular, early medieval pilgrimage involved a journey to a holy site, along a route that was itself marked by significant churches, crosses or holy wells. The pilgrim would move along this route, encountering and experiencing various places, before ultimately reaching his goal. In the early medieval saints' lives, voyage tales and annals, there is also a strong sense of islands as being the places to which one journeys to, from and around.

Indeed, the voyage tales or *imram* are essentially stories about travel between islands, relating how the saint or secular hero ultimately reaches wisdom or understanding through the experiences that he has on islands along the way. In the eighth-century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis* ('Voyage of St Brendan the abbot'), Brendan travels with his monks on a seven-year journey on the wide ocean, where they encounter several marvellous islands, sea creatures and other wonders.⁷⁸ In the early ninth century *Immram curaig Máele Dúin* ('The Voyage of Máel Dúin's Boat'), the secular hero, Máel Dúin journeys across the ocean, encountering people, animals and natural phenomena on at least thirty-one islands. They include otherworldly personages, as well as stranded pilgrims and hermits who inhabit small rocky islands, years after they had first set out on their own voyages. In this tale, the hero is seeking revenge for the killing

in *Celtica*, 23 (1999), pp 193-210; It has been suggested that the ponds and small lakes associated with hermitages and monastic sites could have been used for ascetic immersion: Michael Herity, 'Early Irish hermitages in the light of Lives of Cuthbert' in Gerald Bonner *et al* (eds.), *St. Cuthbert, his cult and his community to AD 1200* (Woodbridge, 1989), pp 45-63.

⁷⁶ Ludwig Bieler (ed.), *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh*, SLH, 10 (Dublin 1979), pp. 102-3, §i.28 (27) + B ii.3.

⁷⁷ Ireland, 'Penance and prayer in water', p. 64-5; see also A.T. Lucas, 'Washing and bathing in ancient Ireland' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 95 (1965), pp 65-114.

⁷⁸ O'Meara, *The voyage of Saint Brendan*; O'Loughlin, 'Distant islands', pp 1-20.

of his father, but ultimately he gains wisdom on the voyage and turns away from violence.⁷⁹ Johnston has suggested that the tale is a metaphor for early medieval Ireland, whereby the compiler or story-teller is urging society to turn to the church, with islands metaphorically representing the dangers facing society.⁸⁰

In the literature, there is also often a strong sense of islands as places that people travel to and around (often moving around them in a clockwise direction). Accounts of travel in some of the hagiographies are evidently based on, or influenced by, the *immrama*. The medieval *Life* of Saint Senán is a good example.⁸¹ Senán's own church was located on Inis Cathaig (Scattery Island), at the mouth of the Shannon estuary, usefully situated on the major early medieval nautical routeway into the island. Indeed, there are references in the *life* to pilgrims arriving by boat from the Mediterranean (i.e. *latium*),⁸² while the river also provided strong links between Inis Cathaig and Cluain maicc Nóis (Clonmacnoise), situated in the heart of the Irish midlands. In fact, Scattery Island was effectively the 'port' of Clonmacnoise.⁸³ In the *Life* of Senán the saint first travels around southwest Ireland, establishing churches on various islands on rivers, lakes and the ocean (e.g. at Inis Cara (on River Lee, Co. Cork), Inis Tuaiscirt, Inis Mór (Blasket Islands, Co. Kerry), Inis Caerarch Céoil (Mutton Island, west Clare) and Inis Connla, on the Shannon estuary).⁸⁴ He travels then to Inis Cathaig, expels a monster that had been living on the island, walks around the island blessing it with his monks and establishes his church there (despite the opposition of the king of the Uí Fidgente). As with other medieval hagiographies, this is a political document, attempting to illustrate the historical links between the founder's church and other churches in the region, but the idea about islands being linked by the journeys of the saint is striking.

In the early medieval literature, the journey by boat (or occasionally by foot in miraculous events) to the island was also an important motif. Occasionally, setting out on a journey to an island in the early Middle Ages exposed the traveller to various risks: hunger, exhaustion, exposure to weather, drowning, or even attacks by watery monsters or otherworldly creatures. Movement out to an island also exposed one to dangers of inhospitality or the experience of insecurity as one is received into the hands of the

⁷⁹ Oskamp (ed. and trans.), *The voyage of Máel Dúin*, pp 99-180.

⁸⁰ Elva Johnston, pers. comm.

⁸¹ Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 1.1775-2501, pp 201-21.

⁸² Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 1.2069-87.

⁸³ John Bradley, 'The monastic town of Clonmacnoise' in H.A. King (ed.). *Clonmacnoise Studies 1: Seminar Papers 1994* (Dublin, 1998), p. 47.

⁸⁴ Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 1.2093, 1.2155, 1.2189, 1.2190, pp 209-13

people living there.⁸⁵ It follows then that the inhabitation of an island provided security and the ability to manage how visitors would access and experience your home. The idea of movement out to and around islands (particularly those on territorial boundaries, as crannogs and islands on rivers and lakes often were), is also important in social terms in the early medieval period. While saints and kings (on hostings) could travel outside the boundaries of the túath, the lower social classes, labourers and slaves were restricted in their ability to cross boundaries, as they risked becoming outlaws and unprotected by law. On the other hand, it is possible that skilled artisans, such as metalworkers, may have had the ability to travel throughout a region, exchanging their skills for raw materials, patronage and protection. It is also evident that men and women might have had different experiences of travel, because it is evident from the sources that women were more restricted in their ability or freedom to move around the landscape (although this is undoubtedly a construct of the texts). In conclusion then, travel and movement to islands could be something that could expose a person to different experiences, risks and potentialities.

Islands and social identity in the early Middle Ages

Introduction

If islands were places of significance in the early medieval imagination, then it would be interesting to explore how people used them to negotiate different types of social identities and relationships within their communities. Both the archaeology and history of the early Middle Ages reveals that social identity was of great significance in people's daily lives. They ordered the houses and dwellings in which they lived, and the wider landscapes in which they worked, so as to construct and negotiate social relationships of gender, age, kinship and class. They created and represented their identities by the places they inhabited, the clothes, personal jewellery and hairstyles they wore, the food they ate and the tasks that they did everyday. At a local level, the identities of different individuals and social groups (i.e. from kings to labourers) were brought into being and maintained by the varied public tasks they carried out, from supervising activities at a public assembly (kings), to digging the ditches of a ringfort (by serfs and slaves). Within local and regional landscapes, the building, use and maintenance of particular monuments (e.g. churches and graveyards) and works of architecture (e.g. houses, ringforts, crannogs) enabled particular conceptions of social identity to be created within the community. At a wider level, people moving along routeways, or across territorial

⁸⁵ For the experience of travel in the early Middle Ages, see G.R. Overing and M. Osborn, *Landscape of desire: partial stories of the medieval Scandinavian world* (London, 1994), pp 53-55,

boundaries, brought objects (pottery, glass, wine) from distant places and enabled relationships between other communities. People's identities would change throughout their lives, as the rites of passage into adulthood, marriages, deaths, transformed how they saw themselves, and how others saw them.

Using historical sources, it is possible to see how early medieval scholars themselves actively used texts and documents to construct and shape such social identities. In the early Irish laws, hagiographies and narrative literature, we can see how legal jurists and monastic scribes set down normative rules for social identity (particularly in terms of social ranking and kinship). Their work also speaks of their own ideologies, prejudices and perceptions. The early Irish laws, annals, saint s' lives and genealogies were mostly compiled by a secular or ecclesiastical, educated elite, mostly men, who aimed to shape the world they lived in. Thus their beliefs about social identity revolved around issues of power, social hierarchy and Christian patronage. Texts like the eighth-century law-tract on status, *Crith Gablach*, are immensely powerful artefacts, and have been hugely influential on the ways we think about that society. For example, early Irish historians and archaeologists have long been interested in the hierarchical character of early Irish society, with a particular focus on social class, kinship and changing patterns of communal and individual land ownership. Recent archaeological studies have also tended to emphasise the importance of social ranking and class differences, with an emphasis on social elites, such as nobles, kings, abbots and bishops. However, it has to be said that while much has been achieved in reconstructing early Irish social organisation, that the subject of social identity is still remarkably under theorised.⁸⁶

Interpreting early medieval social identities

Introduction

Recent studies of social identity in the early Middle Ages have suggested that it should be considered as being organised around some 'structuring principles', such as ethnicity, race, political organisation, kinship, gender, age, sexuality, the body, social ranking, class

74-76.

⁸⁶ For general introductions to identity studies in archaeology, see Lynn Meskell, 'Archaeologies of identity' in Ian Hodder (ed.), *Archaeological theory today* (Cambridge, 2001), pp 187-213; Sian Jones, *The archaeology of ethnicity: constructing identities in the past and present* (London, 1997). Recent studies of identity in early medieval Britain include W.O. Frazer and A. Tyrrell (eds.), *Social identity in early medieval Britain* (London and New York, 2000); John Hines 'The becoming of the English: identity, material culture and language in Early Anglo-Saxon England' in *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 7 (1994), pp 49-59; John Hines, 'Welsh and English: Mutual origins in Post-Roman Britain' in *Studia Celtica*, 34 (2000), pp. 81-104.

and status.⁸⁷ People could have had multiple identities cutting across each of these categories (e.g. a young, female slave of a particular kindred could have been seen by people as having several different identities, etc). I would add some further 'structuring principles'. People's 'sense of place' was also significant. Through their identification with a particular locality or region and an intimate knowledge of its topography, people sought to place themselves at home, with others about them. Similarly, people also drew from their collective *senchas* or 'sense of history', and knowledge of events to create a social identity. In other words, social identity should also be understood in terms of place and memory.

The person and the social group

That people in the early Middle Ages were literally bound around with 'rules' or structures of social identity that constrained their actions to some extent (e.g. a slave was unlikely to have walked into a king's house wearing expensive clothing) is a familiar idea. However, social identity in the early Middle Ages was not always a 'given' or innate, but was occasionally fluid and mutable, manipulated when the opportunity presented itself and potentially negotiable (to some extent) by people themselves through their lifecycles. People had the agency to make their own way, to choose and experience many different aspects of identity within the social group through their lives (e.g. from childhood to aged adulthood). Giddens's theory of structuration helps to explore how people as agents could have defined and created these 'rules' themselves by behaving in regular and predictable ways, and occasionally also attempted to alter and re-negotiate these identities every day.⁸⁸ While a person may be given some structured identities and roles upon birth (e.g. in terms of sexuality, class, and kinship), the individual always has the potential of some change (albeit within the various social, ideological and physical limitations imposed by the social group). For example, early Irish laws imply that in early medieval Ireland, a freeman's family, through careful husbandry and luck over four generations, could slowly ascend up the social ladder to lordship.

In fact then, people actually have their identities defined by their diverse relationships with each other. In this sense, social identity can be seen as a dynamic interaction between the individual and the social group. Thence, recent theoretical studies of social

⁸⁷ W.O. Frazer, 'Introduction: Identities in early medieval Britain' in Frazer and Tyrell (eds.), *Social identity in early medieval Britain*, pp. 1-23.

⁸⁸ For a brief discussion of the theory of structuration (structure and agency), see Anthony Giddens, *Sociology* (Cambridge, 1989, revised ed. 2001), p. 668.

identity in archaeology have therefore tended to stress the importance of seeing it as a social process, always in a state of becoming, rarely completed. Identity in the early Middle Ages, as today, was a dialogue, never ending, always 'in process'.

Identity as practice

However, uneasy with such structural approaches, some have questioned the 'dualist' conception of identity that they produce, the sense that there is an actual distinction between the individual and the social group. In many societies, and seemingly also in early medieval Ireland, people's identities were socio-centric and relational, defined by interactions and encounters with others. Giles has recently argued that identity is actually an on-going relational project, constituted through a network of relations between people, animals, places, things and times.⁸⁹ In other words, identity is never an innate property; it emerges only through performance. Identity is practice, always takes work and is constituted by that work.

Using these ideas, archaeology has the ability to apprehend the material expression of early medieval social identities, as individuals, households and local communities all constituted and represented their identities by ordering the landscapes in which they dwelled. A perspective based on the study of material culture allows scholars to look at those daily practices, tasks and routines that created a collective sense of identity and belonging, including the ordering of houses and dwellings, objects, dress and bodily appearance. Thus, identity in the early Middle Ages can be studied through the rhythms of inhabitation, and the ways that people, animals, places and things operate within the specific historical and material context of early medieval Ireland, between the fifth and the eleventh centuries AD. In the following section, I am going to explore how islands (and particularly crannogs) may have been implicated in the formation of identity in the early Middle Ages.

Islands, ethnicity and identity in early medieval Ireland

Introduction

In early medieval Ireland, race and ethnicity was an emerging concept in the way that people of this island understood themselves, with a 'sense of Irishness' appearing as early as the seventh century AD. It is important to distinguish between race and ethnicity. **Race** is a controversial and largely discredited concept within sociology,

⁸⁹ Mel Giles, 'Open-weave, Close-knit: archaeologies of identity in the later prehistoric landscape of East Yorkshire'. Unpublished PhD thesis (University of Sheffield, 2001), pp 21-52, provides a theoretical discussion on social identity as practice.

largely because of the discrepancies between how it is used in science and how the general public sees it. Giddens has argued that there are no clear-cut biologically-distinct races, only a range of physical variations (e.g. in genes, skin colour, physical appearance) in human beings. The inheritance of these 'racial' attributes arises from population in breeding that will vary according to the degree of contact between different social or cultural groups. Thence, some sociologists argue that it is an ideological construct, based on choices of physical differences that are seen to be socially significant (for example, genetic inheritance or skin colour *is* popularly considered to be significant, while hair colour *is not*).⁹⁰

Ethnicity is a concept however, which is entirely social in meaning. It refers to the cultural practices and beliefs of a given community of people that see themselves as different from other groups in a society (and that are often seen by them as different). Thence it emphasises difference, and ethnic groups typically distinguish themselves from each other by language, history, ancestry (real or imagined), religion, dress and material culture. As a social construct, ethnicity is not innate, but is produced and reproduced across time. Through socialisation, young people assimilate the ethnic lifestyles, norms and beliefs of their own communities. Ethnicity provides a thread of continuity with the past and can be kept alive by the practice of cultural traditions (e.g. through everyday routines, or periodically at gatherings or festivals). It is therefore a powerful trope in individual and group identities. In fact of all the aspects of social identity, there can hardly be a more potentially complicated and controversial subject as ethnicity, particularly when it is confused, as it often is, with the issues of race and biological genetic inheritance. Add to this theoretical confusion the contradictory evidence provided by archaeology, history, folklore, linguistics, philology and genetics and it could be seen that the interpretation of race and ethnicity might be seen as a potential morass.

How are these concepts pertinent to the study of islands in the early Middle Ages in Ireland? Well firstly, there still is a popular perception at least that Ireland was populated by an homogenous 'Celtic' racial group until the end of the early Middle Ages.⁹¹ Interestingly, the scholarly interpretation of race and ethnicity in early

⁹⁰ Giddens, *Sociology*, pp 246-7.

⁹¹ For a discussion of these issues, see T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Language and society among the Insular Celts, 400-1000' in Miranda Green (ed.), *The Celtic world* (London, 1995), pp 703-36. For a recent critique of 'Celticity', see Barra Ó Donnabháin, 'An appalling vista? The Celts and the archaeology of late prehistoric Ireland' in Angela Desmond *et al* (eds.), *New Agendas in Irish Prehistory: Papers presented in memory of Liz Anderson* (Bray, 2000), pp 189-196.

medieval Ireland, while rarely problematised in Ireland (at least prior to the Viking raids), has again become a subject of debate in Scotland (e.g. with questions as to the validity of concepts of its early historic Picts, Scoti, Angles) and England (with its Britons, Romano-British, Anglo-Saxons, Scandinavians, etc).

From the fourth to fifth century, Irish communities were in close contacts with the peoples of the west coast of Britain, whether through the trade of wine and fleeces, raiding for slaves and the arrival of Christian populations. Indeed, it is increasingly recognised that Ireland had long been influenced by developments in Roman and Dark Age Britain, rather than being an isolated island. At the very least, there were also strong contacts between the Dál Riata kingdoms of northeast Ireland and southwest England, and possibly between the Déisi and the peoples of southwest Britain. In the sixth and seventh centuries, there is also plenty of historical and archaeological evidence for cultural contacts between Ireland, Anglo-Saxon England, Merovingian France and Visigothic Spain.⁹² In the ninth and tenth centuries, the emphasis shifts northwards, towards the Scandinavian and North Sea countries, although various exotic objects recovered from Hiberno-Norse Dublin suggests some trading contacts with the Mediterranean and north Africa.⁹³

Historians consider it likely that the early medieval Irish had developed a distinctive sense of ethnic identity as early as the seventh century, as educated classes worked towards developing an elaborate origin-legend embracing all the tribes and dynasties of the island.⁹⁴

It would appear that the Irish had developed a sense of identity and 'otherness' as early as the seventh century and had begun to create an elaborate origin legend embracing all the tribes and dynasties of the country. This was the work of a mandarin class of monastic and secular scholars whose privileged position in society allowed them to transcend all local and tribal boundaries.⁹⁵

⁹² J.M. Wooding, 'Cargoes in trade along the western seaboard', in K.R. Dark (ed.) *External contacts and the economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, 1996), pp 67-82; Ewan Campbell, 'The archaeological evidence for external contacts: imports, trade and economy in Celtic Britain A.D. 400-800' in K.R. Dark (ed.) *External contacts and the economy of Late Roman and Post-Roman Britain* (Woodbridge, 1996), pp 83-96.

⁹³ P.F. Wallace, 'The economy and commerce of Viking Age Dublin' in K Dümmler, H. Jankuhn, H. Siems and D. Tieme (eds.), *Der Handel der Karolinger- und Wikingerzeit*, part 4 of *Untersuchungen zu Handel und Verkehr der vor- und frühgeschichtlichen Zeit in Mittel- und Nordeuropa*, (Göttingen, 1987), pp. 200-245.

⁹⁴ See R.V. Comerford, *Inventing the nation* (London, 2003), pp 51-5, for medieval Irish 'myths of origins'.

⁹⁵ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland' in *Historical Studies* 11

Indeed, it is likely that the 'islandness' of Ireland was a significant factor in this development of the idea of the peoples of Ireland as being a distinct bounded society, found within a distinct bounded geographical space (i.e. an island). There was also a growing sense amongst the powerful political dynasties of the potential for developing the kingship of all Ireland, the control of the whole island, whatever its reality, towards the end of the first millennium A.D.⁹⁶ This sense of Irish identity was complex, as Thomas Charles-Edwards has pointed out.

At the beginning of the eighth century it was still possible to think of an Irish people of diverse origins. The unity of the Irish, claimed the *Primer of the Poets*, *Auraicept na nÉces*, lay in a unity of language, not a unity of race'...Since the Irish, in spite of a passion for genealogy, were not universally thought to be descended from one ancestor, there could be distinct *cenéla* – here 'races' in the sense of peoples thought to be unified by common descent.⁹⁷

If an eighth-century scholar was careful to distinguish between language and race, and defined the latter as a social group linked by common perceived ancestry, it may be worthwhile to clarify our own ideas about ethnicity in early medieval Ireland. Indeed, the relationships between genetic patterns, historic populations and ethnic identities have recently become subjects of controversy between geneticists and archaeologists.⁹⁸ Slightly less controversially, recent biological and skeletal studies of early medieval populations have also chosen to deal with questions of Irish and Scandinavian race, ethnicity and identity in the period.⁹⁹

Apart from being useful topics for academic scholarship, ideas about early medieval ethnicity raise questions about people's understanding of Irishness and ethnicity during the period. If ethnicity is a social construct based on a perceived difference, then who did the early medieval Irish (or was there even one such group) think they were different from?

(1978), pp 1-35, at p. 35.

⁹⁶ Ó Corráin, 'Nationality and kingship in pre-Norman Ireland', p. 35.

⁹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 579-80.

⁹⁸ For a recent debate about the pros and cons of genetic analyses in Irish archaeology, see Gabriel Cooney, 'Genes and Irish origins' in *Arch. Ire.*, 52 (2000), p. 29; Peter Woodman, 'Ancient DNA – don't panic' in *Arch. Ire.*, 54 (2000), pp 21-22; Dan Bradley and Emmeline Hill, 'What's in a surname – geneticists reply' in *Arch. Ire.*, 54 (2000), p. 23; Gabriel Cooney, 'Is it all in the genes?' in *Arch. Ire.*, 55 (2001), pp 19-21; Barra Ó Donnabháin, 'aDNA and aRCHAEOLOGY' in *Arch. Ire.*, 56 (2001), pp 34-35.

⁹⁹ For recent genetic and biological studies of Irish early medieval populations, see J.P. Mallory and Barra Ó Donnabháin, 'The origins of the peoples of Ireland: a survey of putative immigrations in Irish prehistory and history' in *Emania*, 17 (1998), pp 47-81; Barra Ó Donnabháin and Benedikt Hallgrímsson, 'Dublin: the biological identity of the Hiberno-Norse town' in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin II* (Dublin, 2001), pp 65-87.

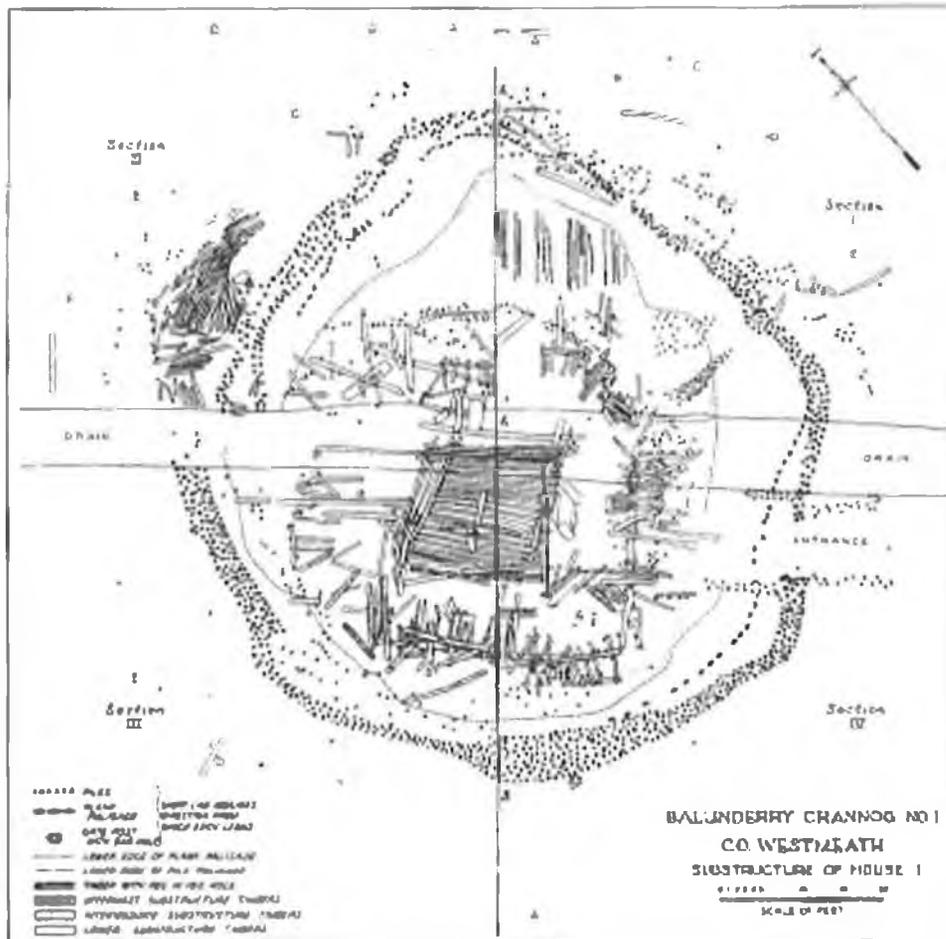


Fig. 4.5 Plan of the early medieval crannog of Ballinderry No. 1, Co. Westmeath. The site was occupied from the late-tenth century to the late-eleventh century AD, and the distinctive Hiberno-Norse character of the crannog's houses and material culture suggests significant Scandinavian influences, if not even a presence, in the north Irish midlands at the end of the early Middle Ages. (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', Pl. XIII).

For example, how did people regard or consider the 'foreign' or exotic imported objects that have been found on early medieval settlements? It seems likely that people deliberately employed the sixth to seventh-century E-ware pottery and Merovingian glass beakers and bottles found on Moynagh Lough, Rathinaun and Lagore crannogs¹⁰⁰ and the Frankish swords and shields found on Lagore as exotic symbols of far-flung connections, emphasising the extra-territorial links that they had with other communities.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Bourke, 'Glass vessels of the first nine centuries AD in Ireland' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 124 (1994), pp 163-209.

It is also worth querying how Irish people in the tenth and eleventh century actually regarded the Hiberno-Norse silver coins and ingot hoards or the Anglo-Saxon and Kufic coins found in the Irish midlands, that had been brought there from Dublin, England or the Mediterranean. Many of these 'foreign' objects have been recovered from crannogs in Westmeath, suggesting that the upper social classes were deliberately making use of imported artefacts in discourses of power within their own communities. In fact, questions of ethnicity become even more interesting when settlement sites like Ballinderry crannog no. 1, Co. Westmeath are considered. This crannog is so distinctively Hiberno-Norse in its 'ethnicity', from its distinctive rectangular house to its Viking sword, bow, tools, personal ornaments and gaming equipment, that is beginning to be regarded as possibly an Hiberno-Norse stronghold in the tenth and eleventh century (Fig. 4.5). However, it could equally be regarded as the dwelling place of a Gaelic Irish community that were sufficiently fascinated or enthralled by such material that it dominated their possessions.¹⁰¹ Even more problematical though, did people regard these items as Irish, Hiberno-Norse, Dublin, eastern Irish, or what?

Islands, kinship, community and the *túath* in early medieval Ireland

Introduction

It is clear that for the people of early medieval Ireland, **kinship and family** was a crucially important source of identity for both individuals and social groups.¹⁰² By the seventh and eighth century, early Irish laws indicate that the basic social unit was the *fine* or kin-group. The kin-group was a much larger concept than the modern family of parents and children, but included all those males with an ancestor in common, usually up to and including second cousins. This was seen as being inherited through patrilineal or agnatic descent from a common male ancestor and the kindred would thus be named after this common ancestor. Thence, for example, we have the seventh and eighth century population groups of the kingdom of Mide; the *Clann Chólmáin* ('family of Colman'), the *Uí Fiachrach* ('descendants of Fiachrach') and the *Cenél Fiachach* ('kindred of Fiachach').¹⁰³

¹⁰¹ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannóg no. 1', pp 103-239; Johnson, 'Ballinderry crannóg No. 1: a reinterpretation', pp 23-71; O'Sullivan, 'The Harvard Archaeological Mission and the politics of the Irish Free State', p. 23.

¹⁰² Kinship ties, in anthropological terms, are those connections between individuals that are established through the lines of descent which connect blood relatives (mothers, fathers, children, grandchildren, cousins, etc). For discussions of kinship in early medieval Ireland, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 84-95; T.M. Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship* (Oxford 1993); T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Anglo-Saxon kinship revisited' in John Hines (ed.), *The Anglo-Saxons from the migration period to the eighth century: An ethnographic perspective*, (San Marino, 1997), pp 171-203.

¹⁰³ See Eoin Mac Neill, 'Early Irish population groups: Their nomenclature, classification and

In the seventh and eighth century, the primary kin-group was reckoned to be the *derbfine* – comprising the four generations of descent from a common great grandfather (i.e. the ancestor, his sons, grandsons and great-grandsons, thence including those relations out to second cousins, etc). However, early medieval land inheritance and kinship also involved two deeper lineages of more distant relations (*iarfine* of five generations and *indfine* of six generations). It is also thought that by the eighth century that the *derbfine* was diminishing in importance to be replaced by the *gelfine* (a shallower kin-group, of only three generations, of a common grandfather).¹⁰⁴ In other words, there was an increasing emphasis on smaller, nuclear family units. However, some scholars have suggested that the historical evidence for this has been over-stated.¹⁰⁵

Kinship governed many aspects of life for early medieval people, including their inheritance of land, their birth into social rank (noble, commoner and slave) and their potential for taking on a particular social role or office (such as that of a king, lord or poet) within the community. In fact, the *fine* essentially formed the basis for most social and legal interactions. For example, in the law tracts *Coibnes uisce thairidne* ('judgements on the movement of water) and *Bechbretha* ('bee judgements'), the ordering of such activities as milling grain and the tending of bees was structured around concepts of kinship.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, one of the most serious offences under Irish law was *fingal*, or kin-slaying. Since murder was normally atoned for by the payment of compensation to the victim's *fine* by the perpetrator's *fine*, the killing of one's own kin defeated the Irish social and legal system, so sanctions against *fingal* were very severe.¹⁰⁷

Kinship, families and households

While anthropology shows that there can be variation, most societies are based around the nuclear family, including parents and children.¹⁰⁸ In early medieval Ireland, it is

chronology' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 29c (1911), pp 59-114.

¹⁰⁴ Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship*; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 86-8.

¹⁰⁵ Nerys Patterson, 'Patrilineal kinship in early Irish society: the evidence of the law tracts' in *Bulletin of the Board of Celtic Studies* 37, (1990), pp 133-65.

¹⁰⁶ Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp 99-108.

¹⁰⁷ Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp 127-8.

¹⁰⁸ Giddens, *Sociology*, pp 170-200, has summarised how, anthropologically speaking, the family can be viewed in various ways. It can be seen in functional terms as a unit of economic production that performs certain tasks fulfilling society's basic needs (e.g. teaching children about social and cultural norms, thus helping to perpetuate the social order, etc). Feminist thinking on the nuclear family has emphasised instead the domestic division of labour, inequalities in power relationships, and the work of women within caring activities (raising of children, the elderly sick, emotional and loving support of a partner). Even more recent work focuses on the tumultuous nature of personal relationships,

useful to think instead of the *household* (*muintir*). Some of the people of the household were connected by blood (e.g. grandparents, parents, children, brothers and sisters, etc), some were connected by marriage (e.g. husband and wife), while others were connected by the social ties of fosterage (e.g. foster-father, foster-daughter) or dependent labour (e.g. the husband or wife's servants and slaves – some of whom could be the children of the man and his slave woman).¹⁰⁹ In other words, the social unions of marriage, fosterage and dependency connected a person to a wider range of kinspeople. In early Irish society, marriage between a man and a woman was a social contract whereby a woman was 'bound' by her kindred to the man's.¹¹⁰ This relationship, formally agreed, was at the heart of the early medieval Irish household.¹¹¹ The household is significant in archaeological terms too, because it means that patterns of activity within the house or enclosure have to be interpreted in terms of more people than might be expected, men and women, children, relations, slaves and dependants.

Kinship, place and the túath

In seventh and eighth-century Ireland, the basic territorial and socio-political unit wherein the *fine* was located was the *túath*, variously to be translated as 'people', 'laity', 'tribe', 'territory', or 'petty kingdom'. The geographical and population size of the *túath* would have varied regionally and across time, but a general size of 15-20km across has been suggested, while its population could have been about 3000 people.¹¹² These small kingdoms often had a clear topographical basis, with the territory of a people corresponding to a *maige* ('plain' of well-cultivated land), contrasted with mountain, bog and woodland. These latter areas were often used as commonage for grazing or

marriages and family patterns in a changing world.

¹⁰⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 84-95.

¹¹⁰ For studies of marriage in early medieval Ireland, see Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Women in early Irish society' in M. MacCurtain and D. Ó Corráin, *Women in Irish society: the historical dimension* (Dublin, 1978), pp 1-13; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Marriage in early Ireland' in Art Cosgrove (ed.), *Marriage in Ireland* (Dublin, 1985), pp 5-24; Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Women and the law in early Ireland' in M. O'Dowd and S. Wichert (eds.), *Chattel, servant, or citizen: Women's status in church, state and society* (Belfast, 1995), pp 45-57; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp 68-79; Bart Jaski, 'Marriage laws in Ireland and on the continent in the early Middle Ages' in C. Meek and K. Simms (eds.), *The fragility of her sex? Medieval Irish women in their European context* (Blackrock, 1996), pp 16-42.

¹¹¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 108.

¹¹² For studies of the *túath*, see T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The pastoral care of the Church in the early Irish laws' in John Blair and Richard Sharpe (eds), *Pastoral care before the parish* (Leicester, 1992), pp 63-80, at p. 64, and pp 68-9; Nerys Patterson, 'Clans are not primordial: pre-Viking Irish society and the modelling of pre-Roman societies in northern Europe' in Bettina Arnold and David Blair Gibson (eds.), *Celtic chieftdom, Celtic state. The evolution of complex social systems in prehistoric Europe* (Cambridge, 1995), pp 129-36; Gibson, 'Chieftdom, confederacies and statehood in early Ireland', pp. 116-28. The estimate of the population of a typical *túath* may be problematical, as it is ultimately based on a previous extrapolation by Liam de Paor of the figures in the English Domesday Book of the eleventh century.

transhumance.¹¹³ The territorial boundaries of the *túath* could be marked by grave-mounds, ogham stones, or by natural features such as rivers and lakes. By the eighth and ninth century, the expansion of major royal dynasties over weaker peoples, and the territorialisation of the Irish polity meant that the *túath* was diminishing in importance.¹¹⁴ By the tenth and the eleventh centuries, the *túath* had become a political anachronism, with its king (*rí túaithe*) considerably reduced in status and frequently referred to merely as *toísech*. The social and political territory originally encompassed by the *túath* was probably beginning to be divided up into a hierarchy of smaller units, known as the *trícha cé*t and the *baile* (which became the basis of the townland system).¹¹⁵

Early Irish historians believe that most people would have stayed within the boundaries of their own *túath*, giving those boundaries an extraordinary importance.¹¹⁶ Although a freeman could leave the *túath* to attend an *óenach* ('fair') outside the territory, or when he was on military service or pilgrimage, he was expected to stay within its boundaries. It was considered dishonourable for a man to leave his *túath* to marry; while in contrast churchmen and men of learning had more ease of movement, a person outside his *túath* was an outlaw, termed a *deorad*, and until he had obtained land, he had less legal rights. This strong link between person and *túath* was due to the fact that a man inherited both his land and kinship by being born in that *túath*, this is what gave him roots and he would expect to be buried within his *túath*. In contrast, a woman, not normally inheriting land, could leave the *túath* more easily, normally for marriage. If she left her *túath* for marriage, she could expect to be buried outside it. A *túath*, like the church or a lineage, was a community of the dead as well as the living.¹¹⁷ However, the boundary of the *túath* was also potentially fluid and permeable, alliances between *túatha* could have been strengthened through marriage and fosterage amongst the nobility, and periodic 'fairs' (*óenaige*) also provided another opportunity for contacts.¹¹⁸

¹¹³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 12-3

¹¹⁴ Bart Jaski, *Early Irish kingship and succession* (Dublin, 2000), p. 210.

¹¹⁵ Thomas McErlean, 'The Irish townland scheme of landscape organisation' in Terence Reeves-Smyth and Fred Hamond (eds.), *Landscape archaeology in Ireland*. B.A.R. Brit. Series 116 (Oxford, 1983), pp 315-39.

¹¹⁶ Pádraig Ó Riain, 'Boundary association in early Irish society' in *Studia Celtica*, 7 (1972), pp 12-29; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish law' in P.H. Sawyer (ed.), *Medieval settlement: Continuity and change* (London, 1976), pp 83-7; T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'The church and settlement' in Proinsias Ní Chatháin and Michael Richter (eds.), *Irland und Europa. Die kirche im Frühmittelalter* (Stuttgart, 1984), pp 167-75.

¹¹⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 105.

¹¹⁸ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 104.

Kinship and the ownership of land

Early Irish historians, working principally from early Irish law, suggest that every *fine* had its own *fintiu* or kin-land, within which every member potentially had a share.¹¹⁹ However, while the individual had autonomy over his share for his lifetime, he could not sell or otherwise alienate that land without the consent of the *fine*. Upon his death, his share of *fintiu* was equally divided between all legal heirs (*comarba*), inheritance was partible. Individuals could also own land independently of the *fine* that could be disposed of at will, and upon their death could be bequeathed at their own discretion, though the *fine* had the right to a percentage of it. Upon the death of a father, the houses and farm-buildings went to the eldest son, and the land was evenly divided up between sons. If the father only had a daughter (*banchomarba*), she inherited a life-interest in the land, but it reverted to the kindred upon her death. If there were no children, then the land reverted to the *fine* or kindred. In any case, such custom ensured that property stayed within the close kindred (*derbfine*), or after 700, within the *gelfine*. Movable property (tools, personal possessions, livestock) was also divided between heirs. It is thought that there was a gradual shift in land-ownership during the period, moving from communally owned grazing land and woodlands towards an increased individual ownership of land by the end of the period.

Interpreting kinship in the early medieval landscape

It is probably fair to say that Irish archaeologists have barely explored the potential role of the *fine* in the organisation of dwellings, settlements and the landscape, lacking perhaps the confidence that such complex social relationships could be observed in the archaeological record. Perhaps the most coherent approach was Mytum's attempt, as part of his study that explores the dynamic role of the individual and the family in the changing of early medieval Irish society between the fifth and the ninth century AD.¹²⁰ Most recently, Fredengren working from Mytum's ideas has also suggested that ringforts and crannogs were an outcome of this development, representing an increased desire for privacy and an exclusively family-oriented domestic space.¹²¹

It is probable that some early medieval settlements and dwellings express in some way, the social relationships of closely related kin-groups and families. For example, it is likely that the early medieval upland settlement enclosure and hut sites at Ballyutoag,

¹¹⁹ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 398-431; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 84-90.

¹²⁰ Mytum, *Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp 105-14.

¹²¹ Fredengren, *Crannogs*, pp 203-66.

Co. Antrim represents the seasonal dwellingplace of a kin-group (perhaps a *derbfine*) of several related households engaged in cattle herding on communally owned upland pasture.¹²² It is also likely that the identity of the kin-group would be expressed by the common use of particular places that established the antiquity and status of the community, such as public assembly places, royal residences and family churches and cemeteries, churches. It is also likely that ringforts situated close together express close kindred relationships, although this is obviously complicated by the fact that they could also represent relationships based on social ranking and status. At Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, there is a dense concentration of ringforts together overlooking the early medieval crannog, and it is surely likely that these were occupied by people of the same kindred, who were also socially linked to the inhabitants of the lake-dwelling. In early medieval Westmeath, it has also proved possible to identify significant clusters of ringforts and crannogs situated close together along a lakeshore (such as at Cróinis, Coolure Demesne, Rochfort Bay and Kiltoom, see below). These sites probably represent a physical expression of both kindred and socially ranked relationships, as several households herded cattle together along communally owned marshy lakeshores.

It is also likely that the use of domestic space within settlements and houses represented the ordering of the smaller unit of kin-group, the family (parents, children, foster-children) and household (including dependant labourers and slaves). Perhaps, this would have been particularly important on early medieval crannogs, where the island is an intensely bounded space separated from the land by water. For example, on the crannog of Moynagh Lough (one of the few with good evidence for houses), a community of men, women and children inhabited a small island enclosed within the palisade. As important as the site was for craft production and high-status activities such as feasting and gift giving, it was also the venue for familial relations between parents, children and close kin, perhaps as little as fifteen to twenty people. On many early medieval settlements, the evidence for re-building of houses across time (and the symbolic deposition of rotary querns, kneading troughs and other tools in the ruins of the old house, see below) also suggests a concern for the maintenance of the family's link to that particular abode. The role of crannogs (as islands) in maintaining and reproducing these kin-based relations is certainly worth thinking about.

Islands, social hierarchy and status in early medieval Ireland

Introduction

¹²² B.B. Williams, 'Excavations at Ballyutoag, County Antrim' in *U.J.A.*, 47, (1984), pp 37-49.

Early Medieval Ireland was a society obsessed with social rank, class and status. In the early Irish laws, sagas, genealogies and annals, it is possible to discern the constant efforts of early medieval scholars to define and copper-fasten normative ideas of social class and status. While it can be difficult in early Irish studies to see past their opinions, they certainly provide insights into the ways that texts themselves were used ideologically to express and order social class.¹²³ It is also important to remember that the texts with their emphasis on the powerful and the aristocratic can lead the modern scholar to overlook the common folk, the poor or the enslaved. There is also the problem of identifying social change. As the law texts are primarily of the seventh and eighth century, there is the problem of identifying both contemporary and subsequent changes in social organisation, as there are fewer similar sources for the latter part of the period. However, some scholars have argued in favour of significant social changes by the ninth and tenth century, as will be discussed below.¹²⁴

Both archaeological and historical evidence indicate that early medieval Irish society was strongly hierarchical, with various social grades of kings, lords, commoners, hereditary serfs and slaves. Pre-eminent among the sources used to explore ideas about social ranking are the early Irish laws. Early Irish law divided the population into those who were free or independent (*sóer*) and unfree or dependent (*dóer*). The free were subdivided into those who were *nemed* 'sacred', 'privileged', and those who were not *nemed*. The early Irish laws *Bretha Nemed Toísech* and *Uraicecht Becc* distinguish between the *sóernemed* ('noble privileged ones' - such as lords, clerics and poets) and the *dóernemed* ('base privileged individuals' - such as judges, musicians, smiths, other skilled craftsmen and freemen). The unfree were slaves or semi-free persons who were permanently under the authority of a free person, and who had little legal rights. However, in essential terms early Irish law describes a society divided up into two groups: kings and lords; and commoners or free farmers.

Social status was closely linked with concepts of honour, reciprocity and clientship. A person's social rank also determined his or her rights and duties. It was measured by the

¹²³ For analyses of social rank as represented in early Irish law; Eoin MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish law: law of status and franchise' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 36c (1923), pp 265-316; N. McLeod, 'Interpreting early Irish law: status and currency (part 1)' in *Z.C.P.*, xli (1986), pp 46-65; N. McLeod, 'Interpreting early Irish law: status and currency (part 2)', *Z.C.P.*, xlii (1987), pp 41-115; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp 17-97; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 124-136; Patterson, *Cattle-lords and clansmen*, pp 181-206; for specific studies of a particularly significant early Irish law tract, see D.A. Binchy (ed.), *Críth Gablach* (Dublin, 1941); T.M. Charles-Edwards, 'Críth Gablach and the law of status' in *Peritia* 5 (1986), pp 53-73.

¹²⁴ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp 28-32.

honour-price (*lóg n-enech*, literally the 'price of his face') payable for any serious offence (murder, refusal of hospitality, theft) committed against his or her honour. Offences against his or her property led to lesser fines. Interestingly in fact (in the context of the concept of identity as performance), social status in early Irish society was partly defined by the system of clientship, the social and contractual *relationships* based on the exchange of capital. A lord would grant his client a fief of livestock, typically cattle, and would be re-paid in return by the livestock's off-breed, food renders and some services.

Kinship was also important in determining one's social office and status. For example, a man needed to be the descendant (at least a grandson) of a king before he could be considered himself as a potential king. Thus, he acquired social status from being of *royal kindred*. Kinship and inherited status also made it possible to move up or down the social ladder. In principle, it took three generations to move up to a higher social rank. For example, the descendants of a lord of base clients who maintained this position, could rise after three generations, to noble kindred. Conversely, a royal kindred could lose that social status if after three generations they had not produced a king within the community. In other words, movement up and down the social hierarchy, if not common, was certainly possible. In broad terms, it is reckoned that most of the movement was downwards towards the end of the period.

It is important to recognise that society was changing in the early medieval period. Between c.600 and 800 AD, it is largely agreed that Irish society was based on ties of kinship and reciprocity between social classes. However, even within this period, some historians have argued that we start to see an increase in the proportion of the lower classes, with an increasing risk of impoverishment amongst commoners leading to an increasingly large servile force. Between 800 and 1000 AD, early Irish society, as a result of various internal power dynamics, was starting to change significantly. In particular, increasing warfare and military activity led to the restructuring of social obligations towards warrior service and the provision of food to a lord, essentially defining a shift away from reciprocity towards one of labour services as might be seen in a 'feudal' society. This is the period when it appears that ringforts began to be abandoned as dwellings, while the landscape itself may increasingly have been organised into new land units, the *túath* gradually being replaced by the *trícha cét* and the *baile*.

The king and the performance of power in the community

In the aristocratic society of early medieval Ireland, of all the privileged (i.e. *nemed*)

persons in the community, pre-eminent in status and role was the king (*ri*). There are various types of king named in sagas, annals and law tracts, and there are even variations in terminology within the laws. It is generally agreed that in the seventh and eighth century, the most common king, the *ri túaithe* exerted direct rule only over the land and people of his own *túath*. Apart from its king, people and land, some early Irish laws (e.g. *Bretha Nemed Toísech*) also claimed that a *túath* should also have 'a churchman, a lord, a poet', so there is a sense of a *túath* being an integrated community of various social groups and individuals. How many *ri túaithe* were there in existence in the seventh and eighth centuries AD? It has been famously stated that there could have been 'no less than 150 kings in the country at any given date between the fifth and twelfth centuries', but this obviously varied and estimates have suggested lower figures of 100 instead.¹²⁵

Some of these local kings achieved military or strategic dominance over others. Overlords of three to four *túath* were known as *ri túath* ('king of *túatha*') or *ruiri* ('great king'). However, in theory, this did not mean that the king ruled over all this land, the sub-ordination was of one king to another. The most eminent king in the laws, to be equated with the king of a province, was the *ri ruirech* ('king of great kings'), *ollam rí* ('chief of kings') or *ri bunaid cach cinn* (the ultimate king of every individual'). Although the king of Ireland (*ri Érenn*) is mentioned in sagas, it is barely mentioned in the law texts, and while it certainly was an emerging concept by the seventh century, it had not been achieved in reality.

However, early Irish kingship was a shifting and changing institution. In terms of political power and regional territories, early Irish historians have traced a significant shift in Irish society by about 800 AD, as smaller kingships were being absorbed within much more powerful over-kingdoms, such as those of the Uí Néill and the Eoganacht. Through the ninth and tenth century, power was increasingly being taken into the hands of these major dynasties, at the expense of smaller population groups. By the tenth century, there were only about a dozen over-kingdoms in Ireland, now essentially lordships. This shift towards a more 'feudal' society can be seen by the gradual abandonment of the word *ri* for lower, petty kings, as its connotations of sacredness and immemorial right diminished. The increasing use of words such as *dux* (in the ninth century), or *tuísech* ('leader') or *tigerna* ('lord') (in the tenth and twelfth centuries) indicated the waning role of small petty kings and the growing power of the rulers of the major dynasties.

¹²⁵ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 7.

Some of the essences of early Irish kingship were expected to be innate, so a perfect body and an unblemished face were a prerequisite. However, a strong theme in the concept of kingship in early Ireland was also that of *performance*, again an interesting aspect of social identity. The king was expected to carry out certain functions as a symbol of his leadership, some of which typified his ability to enforce his rule. He was expected to administer justice and exact fines for crimes carried out within his territory. He convened the *óenach* (a tribal public assembly at which various social, political or commercial activities may have taken place), as well as the *airecht* ('meeting of freemen'), at which some legal business was transacted. He was expected to take tributes from his subjects and keep hostages in chains as symbols of his power. He maintained a warrior retinue, went on hostings (*slógad*) for attack or defence into rival territories. He was also expected to supervise building projects, such as road maintenance and preparing the site for an assembly. Interestingly, the king himself was to refrain from other *performances*, such as physical labour or the use of a mallet, spade or axe. He also had to avoid breaking his *geisi*, supernatural injunctions or taboos against particular actions, often described in the sagas and usually specific to a particular king of a territory.

Lords and the social ties of clientship

Below the king were various divisions of *flaith* or *aire* (lord), ranging in social status and responsibility.¹²⁶ *Críth Gablach* claimed that there were four basic divisions of *aire* or lords, each of whom held noble status because of former royalty, a current strong family relationship to royalty, or other reasons of high status. These lords included the *aire forgill* ('lord of superior testimony'), a class of noble whose status was based on former royal status or having a strong family relationship to royalty. The *aire forgill* and the *aire ard* ('high lord') both had military responsibilities within the community, providing refuge or defending the *túath*. Other lords included the *aire tuise* ('lord of leadership') and the *aire deso* ('lord'). The lord gained and retained the fealty of commoners (and indeed, possibly other lords) through the social and economic system of clientship. In other words, the lord depended for his own social status on his ability to distribute fiefs and to hold clients, and thence would inevitably be wealthy. Stout suggests that these lords could have owned between 40 and 100ha of land.¹²⁷

There were two forms of clientship; that of free clients (*sóerchéile*) and base clients

¹²⁶ McLeod, 'Interpreting early Irish law (part 1)', pp 57-65.

¹²⁷ Stout, 'Early Christian settlement, society and economy in Offaly', p. 81.

(*dóerchéile*), described in various different law texts.¹²⁸ In base clientship, the lord advanced to the client a *taurchrecc* (fief), which varied according to the rank of the individual, possibly consisting of livestock, land or other valuable items such as farming equipment.¹²⁹ He also provided property known as *soit taurchluideo* ('chattels of subjection'), of the same value as the client's honour price. In return, the client had to provide an annual food rent (*bés tige*, including live animals, meat, grain, malt, bread, milk, milk products and vegetables), winter hospitality for the lord and his entourage, a fixed amount of manual labour and occasionally military duties. The labour services included joining his lord's reaping party (*meithel*) in the cornfields or digging the ramparts of his ringfort. It could also include road maintenance, patrolling for wolves and clearing the site for an *óenach* or assembly. If the base client pays his food-rent and carries out his duties of labour and service for at least seven years, the fief becomes his own property on his lord's death. If a client failed in these duties, he could be fined, or sink to a level of greater dependency, that of the semi-free *fuidir* or slave. Base clientship could only with difficulty be terminated, if both parties were agreeable. If one wasn't, then the other party incurred fines, which would obviously be particularly heavy for the client.

In free clientship (considered more desirable, but possibly rarer), the client also paid an annual rent in return for a fief, albeit at a considerably steeper rate. The free client did not receive 'chattels of subjection' and had to restore the fief to the lord's kin upon the latter's death. However, the contract of free clientship could be terminated at any time by either party without penalty and the free client retained his own independence. It was also possible for a free client to be of the same social status as his lord. The free client may have had to provide some labour services, though these may have been undertaken by his own dependents. He was also expected to personally attend upon his lord on various public occasions. It is also noteworthy that the church similarly had client farmers, known in the early Irish sources as *manaig*, who also provided their monastic *airchinnech* with food and labour services.

Free commoners

Early Irish historians have described the lower rungs of the free classes, beneath the lords, being the people who comprised the various grades of non-noble, free commoners,

¹²⁸ For a discussion of base and free clientship, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship*, pp 337-63; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp 29-33; Kelly *Early Irish farming*, pp 445-8.

¹²⁹ Kelly, *Early Irish law*, p. 446.

normally being the clients or tenants of these lords.¹³⁰ Early Irish laws describe various grades of free commoners (e.g. *aire coisring*, *fer fothlai*, *mruigfer*, *bóaire febsa*, *aithech arathreba a deich*, *ócaire* and *fer midboth*). In the eighth-century *Críth Gablach*, the free commoners are described as the *fodlai bóairech* with the three main categories being identified as the *bóaire*, the *ócaire* and the *fer midboth*. The highest grade amongst them was the *bóaire*, including various small, independent and relatively prosperous farmers, such as the *mruigfer* ('landman') who owned lands worth twenty-one *cumal* and his own plough (freeing him from co-operative ploughing). Being relatively prosperous and owning his own land, the *bóaire* may well have lived and worked on settlements and farmlands at some distance from his lord.

Below the *bóaire* was the *ócaire*, a lower grade of freeman who held no land of his own, but rented it from his lord. He leased a small farm (worth seven *cumals*) or *tír cumaile* of land from his lord on a yearly basis for the payment of one cow, in addition to the customary advance of cattle that constituted the clientship fief for all social grades. Owning only a single ox, he could only plough his own land by co-operating with others of the same social rank, sharing plough equipment and oxen. His cattle may also have been tended in a single cattle herd, similarly making use of co-operative farming practices. It has been suggested that the *ócaire* grade farmers probably inhabited small ringforts in close vicinity of their lords, given the closer economic ties that they may have had with them.

The *fer midboth* ('man of middle huts', possibly referring to temporary habitations) was a person in social transition, the male teenager who had a small honour-price in his own right and limited legal capacity. He worked on his father's lands, and inherited his share of his father's lands when he died. However, he did not acquire the full legal status of a landowner until he reached the age of twenty. Indeed, even if his father still lived and he did not inherit until he himself was old, he still did not acquire full legal status until he actually owned his own land.

Significant social changes were transforming these commoner classes. By the eleventh and twelfth century, the *bóaire*, *mruigfer*, *fer midboth* and *ócaire* had been all replaced by a more general commoner class called *bíatach* ('food-providers'). These were all

¹³⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 68-70; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 440-42; Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, pp 110-30; MacNiocaill, *Ireland before the Vikings*, pp 59-66; Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp 42-44.

tenants of their lords and took the place of the older clients or *céle*. The distinction between the old base and free clientship had disappeared and the *bíatach* now provided their lords with food render and labour services (something that could previously be avoided by free clients). After the Anglo-Norman invasion and colonisation, they were to become the betaghs of the manorial estates.¹³¹

The semi-free

Early medieval Irish scholars have paid relatively little attention to the mass of the population, the 'unfree or the merely ordinary'.¹³² The unfree were made up of two broad groups: the semi-free and the fully unfree. The former consisted of people who were in the economic position of slaves, but were of free descent. As we shall see below, this position would become hereditary if they continued as semi-free for four generations. It has been suggested that both the semi-free and fully unfree classes were growing by the eighth century. It is possible that partible inheritance (i.e. too many sons of the *bóaire* grades were inheriting land, but were unable to maintain status) was leading to the impoverishment of some free-men and their descent down the social ladder. It is suggested that early Irish jurists dealt with this loss of status by inventing a new grade of freemen, the *ócaire*, but some may have descended further into dependency.¹³³

The semi-free included the *fuidir* ('tenants-at-will') and the *bothach* ('cottiers'), essentially the same in practice. The *bothach* received a fief of land, in return for uncertain services. The *fuidir* also received a fief of land and was equally bound by uncertain services. He may have been a tenant settled by a lord on his superfluous lands.¹³⁴ The *fuidir* and *bothach* were not fully free, did not possess full legal rights and economic independence and could not enter into contracts on their own without their lord's consent. Like freemen they performed services for their lord, mostly labour on his lands, in return for material goods and legal protection.

Both the *fuidir* and the *bothach* could descend further to the grade of *senchléithe*. These were people whose ancestors had been a *fuidir* or *bothach* of a lord for four generations.

¹³¹ Charles Doherty, 'The Vikings in Ireland: a review' in H.B. Clarke, M. Ní Mhaonaigh and R. Ó Floinn (eds) *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age* (Dublin, 1998), pp 288-330, at p. 322.

¹³² Even Doris Edel's paper on the 'common people in early Ireland' deals largely with 'free-men', rather than the poor and landless semi-free and unfree; Doris Edel, *The Celtic west and Europe: Studies in Celtic literature and the early Irish church* (Dublin, 2001), pp 51-63.

¹³³ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 68-70; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp 33-36; Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 438-44; Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp 45-48; Brady, 'Labour and agriculture in early medieval Ireland', pp 128-33.

¹³⁴ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, p. 42

While their parents, grandparents and great grandparents had been in the *economic* position of slaves, they were not fully unfree. However, with the passing of the four generations, this economic role became one of social status, and they became *senchléithe*, hereditary serfs bound to the soil, part and parcel of the appurtenances of the lord's estate, holding some land in return for uncertain services. It is also clear from the sources that the church also had semi-free dependants at the same social level as the *fuidir*.

Slaves

Slavery was widely prevalent in Ireland and may have increased in importance through the period. So much so, that Hiberno-Norse Dublin's commerce was probably largely based on the slave trade in the ninth and tenth centuries A.D.¹³⁵ Slaves (*mug* for males, *cumal* for females) occupied the lowest rung of the social ladder, possessing no property and had few legal rights of their own. Female slaves were particularly popular as they could be sexually exploited (despite the opposition of the church) and would find escape difficult. Indeed, slave women were a basic unit of value (i.e. the term *cumal*), probably implying their sale in markets.

Slaves could be born into their class, could originate as prisoners-of-war, or were foreigners taken in raids or people who had fallen into slavery through indebtedness. The slave could not be armed and was responsible for most of the physical labour required by his lord.¹³⁶ While archaeologists and historians frequently see slaves as an 'invisible' class, we should probably remember that they, along with the *fuidir* and *bothach* were responsible for much of the work in early medieval Ireland, and no doubt, for much of the building work on crannogs, ringfort ditches, field-walls and other features that survive landscape today.

We also get shadowy hints in the texts of other social groups that appear to have been regarded as outcasts or otherwise socially marginal. For example, the early Irish laws make reference to wanderers of the woods and marshes. These were distrusted and seen as totally marginal communities, arguably in the same way that the settled community sees 'travellers' in Ireland today. There are other outcast social groups that are described as living in or near monastic settlements, such as criminals, beggars and prostitutes. How

¹³⁵ Paul Holm 'The slave trade of Dublin, ninth to twelfth centuries' in *Peritia* 5 (1986), pp 317-45.

¹³⁶ For discussion of slavery, see Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 68-71; Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp. 438-40; Niall Brady, 'Labor and agriculture in early medieval Ireland', in Allen J. Frantzen and Douglas Moffat *The work of work: servitude, slavery and labor in medieval England*

might such social marginality have been materially expressed? By acts of heavy, dangerous labour, a lack of personal possessions or a physical location in a place at the edge of normal society?

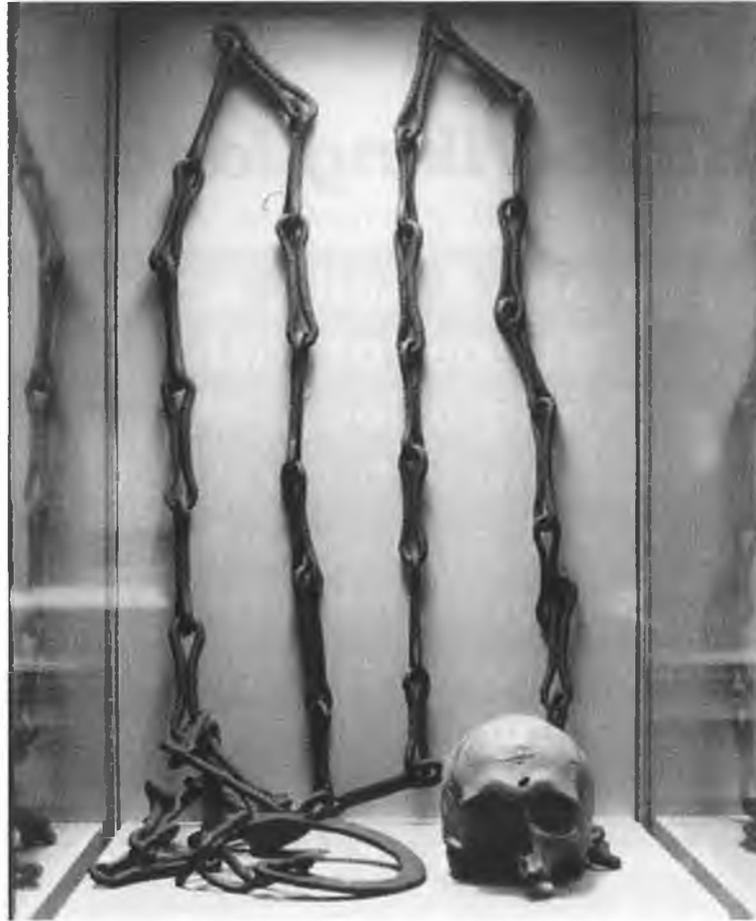


Fig. 4.6 Early Irish historical sources indicate that both early medieval crannogs and islands were occasionally used as prisons or as places to hold slaves (e.g. Dalkey Island, Co. Dublin). These possible slave chains or hostage collars were found with human remains beside the early medieval crannog of Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon (Source: National Museum of Ireland).

It has been suggested that slave chains have been found on several early medieval crannogs, reflecting the movement and trade of slaves through the settlement landscape. A possible slave chain was found with a skull beside a crannog at Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon (Fig. 4.6). Two slave chains were found on Lagore crannog, Co. Meath. However, it has to be stated that these iron chains may alternatively have been hostage collars, used for chaining and then displaying the king's hostages at public assemblies. Indeed, it was a prerequisite of early Irish kingship to have hostages in chains. It is

(Glasgow 1994), pp. 125-145.

interesting that in the more verbose and thence more informative annalistic references in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, crannogs were often used as prisons or as places where particular individuals were kept for a period as hostages. On occasion, individuals either escaped from these prison islands killing their guards on the way, at other times men were murdered upon them. It is possible that in the early medieval period, islands were also used as places to maintain slaves or hostages, although the occurrence of slave chains at royal residences such as Knowth, Co. Meath indicates that some enclosed strongholds were also used for this purpose.

Islands, social status, power and performance

As might be expected, the early medieval settlement landscape of ringforts, crannogs, unenclosed settlements and church sites reflects aspects of these social hierarchies. Some ringforts and crannogs display the physical signs of prestige in their prominent siting, massive construction, internal size and the scale of their enclosing embankments or timber palisades. In this way, they served as symbolic expressions of status and power, displaying the ability to marshal a large labour-force to construct them. Thence, it is likely that some crannogs were variously used as royal seats of power, lodges occupied by kings during a royal tour, and used as the focus for assemblies, feasting and other social activities. On the other hand, there is also now compelling evidence that many crannogs were the habitations of lords, commoners and perhaps even serfs and slaves.

There is a range of different ways of thinking about the role of islands in the negotiation of social status, with isolation, remoteness, social distance and the control of space all significant aspects. Inevitably, given the emphasis within the texts, most attention has been paid to the role of islands as places for the performance of power. The annals and narrative literature, with their frequent references to kings residing, fighting and dying on their islands, all attempt to establish a symbolic association between lakes, islands and early Irish kingship. Indeed islands and lakes were often so significant topographical features within a territory, that they were often used as a synonym for a king and his people.

The *Annals of Ulster*, for example refers to ‘Máel Dúin, son of Fergus, king of Loch Gabor’, (AD 785),¹³⁷ to ‘Cellach of [Loch] Cime...king of Connachta’ (AD703),¹³⁸ to

¹³⁷ A.U. 785.1

¹³⁸ A.U. 703.2

‘Dúnchad son of Congal, *king of Loch Cal*’ (AD 803),¹³⁹ and to ‘Artgal son of Cathusach, *king of Inis Cuilenrighi* of the Cenél Eógain (AD 803).’¹⁴⁰ It also refers to the destruction of a king’s seat, in both of the following entries; ‘Loch Bricrenn was plundered to the detriment of Congalach son of Eochaid and he was killed afterwards at the ships’ (AD 833),¹⁴¹ and ‘Cináed...sacked the island of Loch Gabor, levelling it to the ground’ (AD 850).¹⁴² It also refers to islands and lakes as places where kings were murdered, such as ‘the killing...at Loch Treitni...of Congall, king of Brega’ (AD 634),¹⁴³ and to the event where ‘Áed ua Ruairc...and three score people...were burned in Inis na Lainne’ (AD 1029).¹⁴⁴

The *Annals of Ulster*’s reference to the death of the king of Connachta in AD 703 simply refers to him as ‘Cellach of Loch Cime’.¹⁴⁵ ‘Loch Cime’ is the modern Lough Hackett, in north Co. Galway, the location of an impressively large crannog that still survives today.¹⁴⁶ This may be the island damaged during a storm in AD 990, when the *Annals of the Four Masters* state that ‘The wind sunk the island of Loch Cimbe suddenly, with its *dreach* and rampart, i.e. thirty feet’.¹⁴⁷ Interestingly, the island is also mentioned in the early medieval Irish *Life* of Mochua of Balla. In one incident, the saint arrives at the shore of the Lough Cime at the time when Cennfaelad, son of Colcu, king of Connacht, was resident on the island. The king unwisely ignores the saint’s presence, whereupon Mochua raised the waters of the lake so that the island was submerged (in an event remarkably reminiscent of the storm described above).

Mochua went to Lough Cime; and the attendants said to Cennfaelad, son of Colcu, for he was then king of Connaught ‘The soulfriend’, say they, of Cellach, son of Ragallach is outside’. It is nothing to us’, said Cennfaelad, ‘that he is a soulfriend of Cellach’s: he shall not enter this island’. Then Mochua brought (the waters of) the lake over the island. The king went perforce in a boat after Mochua, and he surrendered himself and his son, and his grandson in bondage to him, and the island to be freed (from tribute); and afterwards it was freed.¹⁴⁸

There is a similar episode in the eighth-century Latin *Life* of Áed mac Bricc. In common with many of these Latin lives, this is probably a late medieval compilation based on

¹³⁹ *A.U.* 803.3

¹⁴⁰ *A.U.* 803.4

¹⁴¹ *A.U.* 833.12

¹⁴² *A.U.* 850.3

¹⁴³ *A.U.* 634.1

¹⁴⁴ *A.U.* 1029.4

¹⁴⁵ *A.U.* 703.2

¹⁴⁶ Alcock, *et al*, *North Galway*, p. 31

¹⁴⁷ *A.F.M.* 990.7

¹⁴⁸ Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 1.4790-4797, pp 286-7.

earlier material, likely to date to the eighth century.¹⁴⁹ It offers some insight into the use of lake dwellings in the early medieval period. It is also significant for this study, in that the episode took place in a king's crannog on Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath, in the north midlands. It relates how a man in the land of Connachta committed fratricide and was brought bound (*ligatus*) to the king of Uí Néill (*ad regem Neill*) to be executed. His parents went to the saint, Áed, to plead for their son's life in fear of losing both their sons. Áed went to the king to free the prisoner.

Rex autem erat in insula stagni Lemdin et, ad portum veniens, Aidus in insulam non permetteretur intrare. Erat edictum a rege ne quis deduceret eum in insulam.
 'However the king was on the island of Loch Lemdin and, reaching the harbour, Áed was not permitted to enter. There was an edict from the king that nobody should bring him to the island'.¹⁵⁰

But Áed performed a miracle by walking on water and the king released the prisoner. Both incidents are designed to show how the church's power, through the saints, was sufficient to overcome exclusion by the secular power in this way. Bhreathnach suggests that the tale also portrays the use of a lake dwelling by kings and their authority over the nearby shore, perhaps the equivalent of the *maigen dígona* around a king's dwelling within which a king could offer protection or in this case hold prisoners.¹⁵¹

Occasionally, there are descriptions of events or miracles that testify to the power of the saint, while also subtly exploring church-state relations in the ownership and use of islands. The twelfth-century *Life* of Colmán of Lynn, on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath describes the visit of the saint to the royal residence of Onchú, king of Fir Tulach, which appears to have been both a fort known as Dún na Cairrge, as well as an island known as Inis na Cairrge. In fact, the king had died on his island despite Colmán's promise that he would not do so without the sacraments.

Araille fecht luid Colmán mac Lúacháin co Dún na Caircei hi Midi. Is ann dorlae Onchú mac sárán marb sechtmain reime a n-Indsi na Caircei. Luid Colmán chuici 7 isbert fris: 'Rogellsam-ne ém ale na raghta-sa báss comad mesiu doberad sacarbaic duit'.

'At a certain time Colmán son of Lúachán went to Dún na Cairrge in Meath. Then Onchú son of Sárán had died a week before in Inis na Cairrge. Colmán went to him and said to him: "surely we had pledged that thou wouldst not die until I had given

¹⁴⁹ Sharpe, *Medieval Irish saints' lives*, pp 297-339.

¹⁵⁰ W. W. Heist, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae ex codice olim Salmanricensi nunc Bruxellensi* (Brussels, 1965), §176 para 31.

¹⁵¹ I am grateful to Edel Bhreathnach for providing me with a translation and commentary on this text; to be published in Edel Bhreathnach, 'A Midhe is maith da bhámar: thoughts on medieval Mide' in T. Condit, C. Corlett and P. Wallace (eds.), *Above and beyond: essays in honour of Leo Swan* (Dublin, forthcoming); Kelly, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin, 1997), pp 568-9.

thee the host".¹⁵²

Onchú asks Colmán to bless his *inis* or 'island', a term that he uses throughout the conversation. Colmán blesses Onchú's island, stating that so long as people are obedient to him (Colmán) they will prosper: *Céin bethir indti dom reir in n-acus, a n-etercein, ní bía terca bíd nach dú at alén ard, a Oncheu* 'As long as people are obedient to me both near and afar, there shall not be scarcity of odd anywhere in thy noble high island.'¹⁵³ The use of the term *Alén ard* or 'high island' may have been significant, indicating that the impressive height of the island and its defences testified to the king's status. Moreover, the *Life* also hints that the king and his subjects should continue to submit to Colmán if they wished for continued prosperity on their island.

Why were kings portrayed as being resident on islands in the lives? Well obviously, crannogs probably served as tribal strongholds, royal seats, summer lodges and as feasting places, so that the historical sources simply reflect fact. However, the use of islands by kings may have been intentional in another way. It has been suggested that early medieval Irish kingship in the seventh and eighth century retained some pagan elements of earlier sacral kingship, albeit within a now Christianised context. The king was theoretically expected to symbolise the union of land and people, and thus retained some role as a mediator between the people and nature, between this world and the underworld. In a just king's reign, his realm would mirror the conditions of the blessed otherworld, as the locus of sacred kingship existed simultaneously on the divine and the human plane.¹⁵⁴ The stories about kings on their islands, and the fact of his presence there, may have been intended to illustrate the king's role as a mediator with the forces of the otherworld and how this was achieved by the location of his residence on a lake island. While the myths and stories conveyed this ideology orally, the physical location, form and appearance of the crannog signalled on a day to day basis, the cosmological ordering or 'rightness' of the social structure.

There is a strong sense of islands being associated with other powerful male figures, whose social status and masculinity was bound together with their ability to hold onto an island. In the ninth-century adventure tale, *Tochmerc Becfeola*, Becfhola, wife of the king Diarmait mac Aedo Sláne, leaves Tara one morning to go one a tryst with her husband's fosterson. She loses her way in the woods of Dubthor Lagen (near Baltinglass,

¹⁵² Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*, § 46, 1.21-25.

¹⁵³ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*, § 52, 1.4-5.

¹⁵⁴ Carey, 'Time, space and the otherworld', p. 5.

Co. Wicklow), before she meets a man on the shore of a lake. He brings her across by boat to a mysterious island on the lake named *Inis Dedaid mac in Daill*, where there is a sumptuous but empty house (another significant theme in the voyage tales). They eat a meal, then lie side-by-side for the night, but refrain from having sex. In the morning, the man fights with his brothers and cousins for the patrimony of the magical island. It is worth looking at the description of the island, as well as the ensuing incident.

...She followed him as far as the lake. There was a boat of bronze in the middle of the lake. A woven bronze chain from the boat was attached to the shore and another to the island in the middle of the lake. The warrior hauled in the boat. She goes into the boat before him. The boat was left in a boat house of clay in front of the island.

She went before him into the house. This was a fine house with both cubicles and beds. He sat down. Then she sat down beside him. He reached out his hand as he sat and brought forth a dish of food for them. They both ate and drank and neither of them was drunk. There was no one in the house. They did not speak to each other. He went to bed. She slipped in beneath his cloak, between him and the wall. However, he did not turn towards her throughout the night, until they heard the call in the early morning from the jetty of the island, i.e. 'come out, Flann here come the men.' He arose immediately, donned his armour and strode out. She went to the door of the house to watch him. She saw three others at the jetty, who resembled him in form, age and comeliness. She also saw four others at the jetty of the island, their shields held at guard. Then he and the three others went forth (to meet them). They smote one another until each was red with the blood of the other, then each one went his way, injured.

§ He went out to his island again.

'May you have the victory of your valour,' said she, 'that was an heroic combat.'

'It would indeed be good if it were against enemies,' said he.

'Who are the warriors?' she asked.

'The sons of my father's brother,' he answered, 'the others are my own three brothers.'

'What have you been fighting about?' asked the woman.

'For this island,' he said.

'What is the name of the island?' she asked.

'The island of Fedach mac in Daill,' he said.

'And what is your name?' she asked.

'Flann, grandson of Fedach,' he replied. 'It is the grandsons of Fedach who are in contention. The island is indeed bountiful. It provides a meal sufficient for a hundred men, with both food and ale, every evening without human attendance.

Should there be only two people on it, they receive only what can suffice them.'¹⁵⁵

However, it is not only powerful male figures who are associated with islands, powerful women are frequently linked with them, and not fantastic creatures only in the narrative literature. In the twelfth-century *Life* of Colmáin maic Lúacháin, the fort of Carrick is stated to be the royal residence of the kings of Fir Tulach. The *Life* claims that the king of Mide, Conchubar Ua Maelsechlainn (who reigned between AD 1030-73), took the fort from Cúchaille, son of Dublaide, king of Fartullagh, and gave it to his queen. The

¹⁵⁵ Máire Bhreathnach, 'A new edition of *Tochmarc Becfhola*' in *Ériu* 35 (1984), pp 59-91, at p. 79.

fort was then the property of the queen of Mide thereafter.

This Carrick was ever the residence of the kings of Fartullagh until the time of the daughter of the son of Conchubar viz. the wife of Conchubar Ua Maelsechlainn, when the king (of Meath) and his queen wrested it from Cúchaille, son of Dublaide, king of Fartullagh, and it was outraged by depriving it of its king, and giving it to the queen of Meath. She was the first of the queens of Meath that took it and every one after her has since held it, and it is their own special property, free from the kings of Fartullagh.¹⁵⁶

The precise location of this site is unclear, but certainly the most impressive stone fort at this part of Lough Ennell, is an early medieval stone cashel on an island known as Cherry Island. It is possible that this island was under the ownership of a queen, rather than a king, after the mid-eleventh century AD.

Islands, negotiating social treaties and political relationships

Islands may also have been seen in the early medieval period as peculiarly liminal or in-between places, potentially useful for significant meetings and the negotiation of treaties and agreements between individuals and social groups. In AD 779, the *Annals of the Four Masters* records;

Ríoghdhal ettir Dhonnchadh, mac Domhnaill, 7 Fiachna, mac Aodha Róin, ag Insi na Rígh i n-Airthear Bregh. As di ro ráidheadh. Cisi brígh, an dal oc Insi na Rígh, Donnchadh ní dichet for muir, Fiachna ní dichet h-i tír.

A royal meeting between Donnchadh, son of Domhnall, and Fiachna, son of Aedh Roin at Inis-na-rígh, in the east of Breagh. Of it was said 'Of what effect was the conference at Inis-na-rígh? Donnchadh would not come upon the sea, Fiachna would not come upon the land'.¹⁵⁷

Inis-na-rígh, (literally the 'island of the kings') is not identified in the texts, but it has been suggested that it is Calf Island off Skerries, Co. Dublin.¹⁵⁸ In AD 784, the year's entry in the *Annals of Ulster*, along with a marginal gloss records,

Rígdal iter Donnchad m. nDomnaill 7 Fiachnae m. nAedho Roen occ Innsi na rRígh in nAirtheru Bregh.

¹⁵⁶ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*, § 50; Paul Walsh, 'The topography of Betha Colmáin', p. 568.

¹⁵⁷ *A.F.M.* 779.9

¹⁵⁸ Hogan, *Onomasticon Goedelicum*, p. 468.

Ossi Brigh
In dal occ Innsi na Rígh
Donnchadh ní dichet for muir
Fiachna ní tuidhecht hi tir.

‘A royal meeting between Donnchad son of Domnall and Fiachna son of Aed Rón at Inis na Ríg in eastern Brega. What is the meaning Of the meeting at Inis na Ríg? Donnchad cannot go on the sea And Fiachna cannot come ashore’.¹⁵⁹

There are various ways of reading this text. It is possible that this is a reference to a failed meeting, an event that did not happen, but it is more likely that it indicates that the island of Inis na Ríg was seen as an appropriate meeting place, situated on a ‘neutral’ boundary, neither on land nor on the sea. Both individuals could come upon the island without entering either the land or sea, thus preserving face. It raises the possibility that some islands were not really seen as areas of land at all. The idea that islands were used as treaty negotiation places is well known from early medieval Scotland. Two islands in the middle of Loch Finlaggan on the Isle of Islay demonstrate this. The largest – *Eileán Mór* (‘the big island’) – was a royal settlement and perhaps a burial place while the name of the smaller island – *Eileán na Comhairle* (‘council island’) beside it suggests that it was used as a place for meetings, gatherings and decision meeting.¹⁶⁰ Both islands were connected to the shore by a causeway, where a Neolithic burial mound and medieval church were located at the edge of the lake. Tradition has it that from the fourteenth century, the smaller island was the location for meetings of the MacDonaldis of Islay, the ‘Lords of the Isles’ up until the sixteenth century. A third small island or crannog – *Eilean Mhuirell* – further away on the lake was reputedly used as a prison in the later Middle Ages.¹⁶¹

Islands, gender, sexuality and age in early medieval Ireland

Introduction

In recent decades, **gender** has been a subject of increased interest in historical and archaeological studies, springing largely from the various waves of feminist thinking since the 1980s. Initially scholars doing ‘gender archaeology’ produced criticisms of the male-based construction of knowledge and employment practices within the academy. They then moved on to the project of ‘finding women’ in the past, exploring gender divisions in labour, or identifying objects or practice that provided evidence for the place

¹⁵⁹ *A.U.* 784.8

¹⁶⁰ Bob Curran, *Complete guide to Celtic mythology* (Belfast, 2000), p. 196.

¹⁶¹ M.W. Holley, *The artificial islets/crannogs of the central Inner Hebrides* (Oxford, 2000), pp

of women and children. The aim was to challenge normative ideas of gender roles (e.g. women as passive homemakers and preparers of food, men as active agents out in the world, involved in specialised crafts). Some gender archaeologists have argued that, while important and revisionist in its correction of biases, it ignored other important related aspects of gender as providing identity difference. Since the late 1990s, gender studies have become more wide-ranging, exploring the cultural and social construction of gender itself, the historical, biological, psychical and cultural variability of **sexuality**, and the cultural construction of the **body**, as well as people's subjective bodily experiences and encounters.¹⁶² Gender archaeology has also encouraged a great interest in the small-scale, the local and the domestic, spheres that are now recognised as being of social, symbolic and political importance, rather than retreats from the world.

In recent years, some early Irish historians have also written critical histories of gender in early medieval history, particular in terms of labour and power. Johnston has shown that one obstacle to writing histories of women is the fact that most of the sources (hagiographies, law tracts and narrative literature) were compiled and written down by male clerics, who used these texts as a means of prescribing normative Christian ideas of female sexuality, ideas that are self-evidently misogynistic.¹⁶³ In the sagas and saint's lives, the woman is thus variously presented as a sexual temptress, weak, incompetent or treacherous. Unless that is, she is the saint being celebrated within the hagiography, then her achievements are all the more heroic given her gender and sexuality.¹⁶⁴ Early medieval archaeologists have traditionally shown less interest in gender studies, and in particular it has barely been touched upon in Irish archaeology. Rather more effort has been put into studies of the 'body', gender and sexuality by archaeologists in Britain. For example, recent archaeological studies of Anglo-Saxon and Viking burial practice and skeletal analysis have revealed that modern normative ideas about gender (e.g. the polarity between male/female) do not always translate into the past. The occasional presence of 'male skeletons' with 'female finds' argues for the presence of a third gender, or at least a variable notion of gender, in the early Middle Ages. It has also been used to point out that biologically speaking, there may have been many people with a

208-210.

¹⁶² For the history of gender studies in archaeology, see Johnson, *Archaeological theory*, pp 116-131.

¹⁶³ For recent critical studies of gender in early Irish history, see Lisa Bitel, *Land of women: Tales of sex and gender from early Ireland* (Cornell NY, 1996); Elva Johnston, 'Transforming women in Irish hagiography' in *Peritia* 9 (1995), pp 197-220; Elva Johnston, 'Powerful women or patriarchal weapons? Two medieval Irish saints' in *Peritia* 15 (2001), pp 302-10.

¹⁶⁴ Johnston, 'Powerful women', p. 304.

variable sexuality (that would be 'corrected' by radical surgery today) in Anglo-Saxon England.¹⁶⁵

The early Irish sources provide most information on gender relations in terms of agricultural and domestic labour and less on land-ownership and property rights.¹⁶⁶ In the absence of land charters, it is difficult to know what women actually owned, although the law tracts claimed that within the union of marriage, the man normally the owned the land, would pass it on his sons, and his dependent labourers or *sencléithi* went with the land.¹⁶⁷ The law tracts also claimed some divisions of labour between men and women, while presenting a general image of co-operative labour in the domestic economy. Most agricultural tasks, such as ploughing, reaping, tending livestock in enclosures and fattening pigs, could be carried out by both sexes. Indeed, Bitel's analyses of property and the value of work within marriage suggest that husband and wife collaborated in looking after cattle.¹⁶⁸

Other tasks were divided between the two. In arable crop cultivation, men ploughed land, sowed cereals, harvested grain and dried it in kilns, while women ground it into flour using querns. In sheep raising, men reared and sheared the sheep, while women combed the wool, spun it into thread, wove it into cloth and dyed it. Other tasks, such as the herding of pigs, sheep and calves was often the work of children, while the preparation of milk products was frequently work associated with women (whether they be wife, daughter or slave). In general, the wife was in charge of dairying and activity relating to milking, preparation of butter and cheeses. Indeed, in general, women's work is described as being closely associated with the homestead, with the woman being in charge of the hearth, child rearing and housework.¹⁶⁹ It is evident then that crannogs, with their carpentry tools, ploughing equipment, quern stones and buckets were venues for both male and female work and activity.

¹⁶⁵ Andrew Tyrrell, 'Corpus Saxonum: early medieval bodies and corporeal identity' in W.O. Frazer and A. Tyrrell (eds.), *Social identity in early medieval Britain* (London and New York, 2000), pp 137-156; C. Knüsel and K. Ripley, 'The berdache or Man-woman in Anglo-Saxon England and early medieval Europe' in W.O. Frazer and A. Tyrrell (eds.), *Social identity in early medieval Britain* (London and New York, 2000), pp 157-192.

¹⁶⁶ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Early medieval law, c. 700-1200' in Angela Bourke et al (eds.), *The Field Day anthology of Irish writing: Vol. IV, Irish women's writing and traditions* (Cork, 2002), pp 6-43, provides an extensive overview and commentary of the perception and role of women in early Irish law tracts; see also Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 448-51; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, pp 68-79; Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland*, pp 134-35.

¹⁶⁷ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 109.

¹⁶⁸ Bitel, *Land of women*, pp 111-37.

Islands, gender and sexuality

In terms of gender, there are very striking patterns in the representation of islands in the early medieval literature. Islands in the early medieval texts were often be places where boundaries in gender and sexuality could be negotiated, transgressed or crossed. Indeed, the portrayal of islands in the early Irish narrative literature is highly revealing about how the church thought about gender and sexuality, and there is certainly a conservative, and as stated above, a misogynistic tone to most of the narratives.

A significant theme in the voyage tale or *Immrama* is the *island of women*. This was a concept that was inspired by earlier Classical works, Christian ideology and native traditions and was seemingly used to project both male sexual fantasies and clerical ideas of the sexual relations between men and women. The island of women was often, but not always, situated in the otherworld.¹⁷⁰ Different stories deal with this in different ways. In the ninth-century *Immram Brain mac Febuil*, the hero Bran travels with his men to the otherworld island of *Tír inna mBan* ('Land of women'). They are tricked onto the island where they are met by a band of women, after which they go into a large house, with couches and unending food supplies of food. Eventually, they leave the island and go home.¹⁷¹

In the early ninth-century voyage tale, *Immram Máel Dúin*, the secular hero Máel Dúin embarks on a voyage of vengeance and after several encounters with fantastic islands, discovers an island populated by a queen and her female retainers who offer him and his companions sex and everlasting life, which they ultimately turn their back on. They first encounter it as a large island, with a great grassy plain. On the island and near the sea, they see a large and high fortress (*dún mór ard*) within which there is a great, adorned house with couches. Seventeen grown girls are there, preparing a bath. Máel Dúin and his followers land on the island, expecting that the bath was for them. They see a rider on a magnificent horse coming towards the fortress, and see that it was a woman. Shortly after, one of the girls came to them.

'Welcome is your arrival.' She said. 'Come into the fort: the queen invites you.'
So they entered the fort [and] they all bathed. And the queen sat on one side of the house and her seventeen girls about her. Máel Dúin, then, sat on the other side, over against the queen, and his seventeen men around him. Then a platter with good food thereon was brought to Máel Dúin and along with it a crystal vessel of good liquor; and there was a platter for every three and a vessel for every three of

¹⁶⁹ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 448-52

¹⁷⁰ Johnston, 'Powerful women', p. 309.

¹⁷¹ Mac Mathúna (ed. and trans.), *Immram Brain: Bran's journey to the Land of Women*, § 61-4.

his people. When they had eaten their dinner the queen said this: 'How will the guests sleep?' she said.

'As you shall say,' said Máel Dúin.

'....', she said, 'your coming to the island. Let each of you take his woman, even her who is over against him, and let him go into the cubicle behind her.' For there were seventeen canopied cubicles in the house with good beds set. So the seventeen men and the seventeen grown girls slept together and Máel Dúin slept with the queen. After this they slumbered till the next morning. Then after dawn they arose.

'Stay here,' the queen said, 'and age will not fall on you, but the age that you have attained. And you shall have lasting life always; and what came to you this night shall come to you every night without any labour. And be no longer wandering from island to island in the ocean.'

'Tell is,' Máel Dúin said, 'how are you here?'

'That is not difficult indeed,' she said. 'There dwelt a good man in this island, the king of the island. To him I bore these seventeen girls, and I was their mother. And then he died and left no male successor. So I took the kingship of this island,' she said, 'after him. 'Every day,' she said, 'I go into the great plain which is the island to give judgement and to settle the community.'

'But why do you leave us today?' said Máel Dúin.

'Unless I go,' she said, 'what happened to us last night will not come to us. Only stay,' she said, 'in your house and you need not labour. I will go to judge the folk for your sake.'

Then they abode in that island for the three months of winter; and it seemed to them that it was three years. 'We have been a long time here,' said one of his people to Máel Dúin. 'Why do we not fare to our country?' he said. 'What you say is not good,' said Máel Dúin, 'for we shall not find in our country anything better than what we find here.'

His people begin to murmur greatly against Máel Dúin, and they said this: 'Great is the love which Máel Dúin has for this woman. Let him stay with her if he so desires,' said the people. 'We will go to our country.'

'I will not stay after you,' said Máel Dúin.¹⁷²

Máel Dúin and his people eventually escape, after an initial unsuccessful attempt that is foiled when the queen throws a 'clew' which attaches itself to the hero's hands that prevents him from sailing away. On the second attempt, they escape (although one of the party loses a hand when he catches the clew, and has it struck off by the hero). The island of women is discussed in this voyage tale in moral terms. The island of women is presented as an inversion of the norm, a place where a woman rules, where the hero initially loses his judgment (tempted by indolence, sex and food) and from whence he must ultimately flee he is to succeed in their quest. Indeed, the island of woman is probably being presented as a metaphor for what would happen to the island of Ireland, if its people did not turn away from temptation and back to the church. In this sense, it is an ideologically loaded, conservative tract intended to promote church hegemony.

Occasionally women also travel to islands and have sexually charged encounters with men. In the ninth-century adventure tale, *Tochmerc Becfeola* mentioned above, Becfeola, wife of the king Diarmait mac Aedo Sláne, intends to go on a tryst with her

¹⁷² Oskamp (ed. and trans.), *The voyage of Máel Dúin*, § 28, pp 153-7.

husband's fosterson. Losing her way in the woods of Dubthor Lagen, she meets a man on the shore of a lake who brings her out to a mysterious island. They enter a large but empty house, where they eat a meal, then lie together on a bed for the night, but refrain from having sex or touching each other. On this island, the theme is one of sexual restraint (inevitably, perhaps, signalling the hero's worth rather than the woman's). Interestingly, the island with its otherworldly house, harbour, abundant food and weaponry, strongly recalls the attributes of a high-status or royal crannog, with the added twist that proper (in the opinion of the church) sexual behaviour could be, but was not, contravened there. The relevant passage in *Tochmerc Becfeola* (presented above, but repeated here for ease of reference) reads as follows:

...She followed him as far as the lake. There was a boat of bronze in the middle of the lake. A woven bronze chain from the boat was attached to the shore and another to the island in the middle of the lake. The warrior hauled in the boat. She goes into the boat before him. The boat was left in a boat house of clay in front of the island.

She went before him into the house. This was a fine house with both cubicles and beds. He sat down. The she sat down beside him. He reached out his hand as he sat and brought forth a dish of food for them. They both ate and drank and neither of them was drunk. There was no one in the house. They did not speak to each other. He went to bed. She slipped in beneath his cloak, between him and the wall. However, he did not turn towards her throughout the night...¹⁷³

The church hagiographers also employed ideas of female virginity and restraint from sexual temptation on islands to symbolise the holiness of female saints. In the early medieval (probably tenth-century) *Life of Senán, Canair*, a female saint, walks across the sea to the 'holy island' of Scatterly Island, the location of a significant monastic settlement at the mouth of the Shannon estuary, to seek burial in its holy ground (Fig. 4.7). She is refused access by the island's saint, Senán, because he sees his island as already notable for its virginity and chastity (unlike the 'islands of women' which are places of sexual licence). Interestingly, he offers her a burial place at the water's edge, on the island's boundary between land and sea. Canair demonstrates her holiness by standing on water throughout their conversation, and counters his arguments until she is finally accepted. God then granted 'that who so visits her church before going on the sea shall not be drowned between going and returning'.

Now, when she had reached the shore of Luimnech (i.e the Shannon estuary) she crossed the sea with dry feet as if she were on smooth land, till she came to Inis Cathaig. Now Senán knew that thing and he went to the harbour to meet her, and he gave her welcome.
'Yea, I have come,' said Canair.

¹⁷³ Bhreathnach, 'A new edition of *Tochmarc Becfhola*', pp 59-91.

'Go,' said Senán, 'to thy sister who dwells in yon island to the east, that thou mayest have guesting therein'.

'Not for that have we come,' saith Canair, 'but that I may have guesting with thee in this island.'

'Women enter not this island,' saith Senán.'

'How canst thou say that' saith Canair. Christ is no worse than thou. Christ came to redeem women no less than to redeem men. No less did he suffer for the sake of women than for the sake of men. Women have given service and tendance unto Christ and his Apostles. No less than men do women enter the heavenly kingdom. Why then, shouldst thou not take women to thee in thine island?'

...A place of resurrection,' saith Senán, 'will be given thee here on the brink of the wave, but I fear that the sea will carry off thy remains.'

'God will grant me the spot wherein I shall lie will not be the first that the sea will bear away.'

'Thou hast leave then,' saith Senán, 'to come on shore.' For thus had she been while they were in converse, standing up on the wave, with her staff under her bosom, as if she were on land. The Canair came on shore, and the sacrament was administered to her, and she straight went to heaven.¹⁷⁴



Fig. 4.7 Early medieval monastic island of Scatterry Island, situated at the mouth of the Shannon estuary. In the tenth-century *Life* of Senán, the island's sanctity was threatened by the arrival of a female saint, who only by a miracle gains the privilege of burial on the island. (Source: A. O'Sullivan, *Foragers, farmers and fishers in a coastal landscape*, (Dublin, 2001), p. 6, Pl. 3.

¹⁷⁴ Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore*, 1.2416-2449f, pp 65-66; Doherty, 'Some aspects of hagiography as a source for Irish economic history', p. 307 suggests a tenth-century date for the *Life* of Senán.

In the voyage tales and hagiographies, there is an occasional motif of islands where food is provided to people miraculously (as in *Tochmarc Becfhola* above). For example, in the ninth-century *Nauigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis*, the voyaging monks arrive at an uninhabited house on an island where there is a table laid out with food and water for them. In the same voyage tale, Paul the Hermit inhabits a small, circular island (two hundred yards across) where he is sustained for thirty years by an otter who brings him a fish from the sea.¹⁷⁵ The same motif of a miraculous otter providing fish to people on an island occurs in the *Life* of Berach, but here it is two women who are inhabiting a probable crannog on Lough Laegachan (probably Lough Lackagh, Co. Roscommon). The relevant passage reads as follows,

Once upon a time great scarcity came to Erin. At that time, Laegachan was in his island on Loch Laegachan, and had no provisions (*Is annsin ro boi Laeghachan ar Loch Laeghacan ina inis fein, 7 ni raibhe biadh aicce*). He went then with his kernes to seek for food, and left his wife, who was pregnant, on the island with a single woman in her company; and he told her, if she would bear a child after his departure, to kill it, as they had no means of rearing it. And the woman bore a male child afterwards, and the woman who was with her asked her what was to be done with the boy. And she said 'Kill it.' The other woman said: 'It is better to take it to the clerk of the church here to the west, to be baptized, and let his service be offered to him in return for his maintenance.' (79) This plan was agreed upon by them, and the child was taken to Berach, and he baptized it, and the name given to it was Ineirge, and its service in life and death, and the service of its seed and offspring till doom was offered to Berach in return for its nurture. And Berach said: 'Let the child be taken to its mother, and assistance of food and means will come to them.' The child was taken to its mother as the clerk said. (80) As the women were there they heard a noise in the house. The woman went to see, but could not perceive anything there. [The same thing happened a second time.] A third time they heard the noise, and a third time the woman went to see, and there was a great salmon there and an otter dragging it to the land. And the woman went and she called the other woman, and the two of them with difficulty carried the salmon, and they dressed it, and ate their fill, and the breasts of the mother of the child were filled with milk forthwith, and thus the child was saved.¹⁷⁶

The story contains several interesting themes reflecting life on an island; the actual reality of an island as a dwelling place for a household (husband, wife, child, and male and female servants), the need to provision the islanders with food, the difficulties faced by a pregnant woman and her female servant on the island, but the idea that this may be the safest place during dangerous times). There is also the idea that the saint can provide for a woman, where her husband fails. During a time of famine in Ireland, he goes out to search for food, essentially abandoning his wife, while leaving her with the awful

¹⁷⁵ O'Meara, *The voyage of Saint Brendan*, pp. 11-12 ; pp 63-4.

instruction to kill the child as they had no food to rear it. However, it is the servant woman who saves the child by bringing it to Berach, who thereafter manfully and miraculously provides the women and child with sustenance (while accepting the boy into the church's service till death). Indeed, the provisioning of island inhabitants with fish by a magical otter may well even have been inspired by the voyage tales (even if it is potentially late medieval in date). Finally, in gender terms, there is the central theme that islands can be a place where women confront danger and negotiate with otherworldly forces themselves.

Islands, age and social marginality

Gender studies have also tended to stress the need to consider other ways in which the body was used for constructing social identities. It is certainly true that age was an important means of ordering and representing identity in the early Middle Ages in Ireland. It has already been stated that both young women and young men are often represented in the literature as individuals who had not yet fully joined the community. In the case of young men, this was particularly important in terms of land and property inheritance. Thence, as stated above, in the early Irish law tracts on status, the *fir midboth* (literally, 'man of middle huts'), was a youth who had not yet graduated to full the social ranking he would inherit on reaching adulthood.¹⁷⁷ Young men were therefore in a state of transition, moving from childhood to full adulthood with all its rights and responsibilities. Nagy has stated that boys on the verge of manhood were liminal figures, crossing from one world to the next. He argues that this state of liminality, with all its ambiguities in terms of social identity, was expressed as a sacred force.¹⁷⁸

This liminal state often led to young men being socially marginalised for a period of time, months or years. Ó Cróinín has stated that some of them were the 'landless youths of the aristocracy who are traditional denizens of the forest'.¹⁷⁹ Nagy has also stated that the 'turf' of the *fian* is 'located beyond settled, politically defined territory, is in the wilderness of interstitial areas, where its members live by hunting, ravaging surrounding areas, or hiring themselves out as mercenaries'.¹⁸⁰ These youths seem to have been simultaneously regarded both as violent, dangerous outlaws and the protectors

¹⁷⁶ Plummer, *Bethada Náem nÉirenn*, § xxvi, 78-80, pp 22-43.

¹⁷⁷ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 445.

¹⁷⁸ J.F. Nagy, 'Liminality and knowledge in Irish tradition' in *Studia Celtica* 16-17, (1981-82), pp 135-43.

¹⁷⁹ Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland, 400-1200*, p. 88.

¹⁸⁰ J.F. Nagy, *Conversing with angels and ancients: literary myths of medieval Ireland*. (Dublin, 1997), p. 295.

of the túath, although they usually attracted condemnation and were associated by the church with paganism.¹⁸¹ However, it is not necessarily the case that they were of high social ranking; McCone has described them as ‘... propertyless males of free birth who had left fosterage but had not yet inherited the property needed to settle down as full land-owning members of the túath.’¹⁸² In any case, these young men joined warbands (*fian*) and resided for a period in forests or other isolated places, where they were associated with hunting, earthy rites-of-passage, violence and even paganism.

There may even be archaeological evidence for crannogs and marshland sites being used by one of these socially marginal groups. Newman has recently suggested that the earliest, sixth-century phase (i.e. pre-crannog occupation) of the early medieval Ballinderry crannog No. 2 might have been a seasonal or temporary marshland dwelling of a band of *fian* warriors.¹⁸³ He has noted that the main activities on the site apparently included the use of wicker troughs for bathing, cooking or processing skins, the butchery and consumption of red deer meat and the processing of deer antler and bone. Newman suggests that the site’s inhabitants were actually engaged in deer hunting (*sedguinecht*) in the woods and marshes adjacent to Ballinderry Lough. However, the objects recovered from this phase of activity suggested that the site’s occupants were people of high social status, perhaps even royalty. This is suggested by the presence of zoomorphic pennanular brooches, imported E-ware pottery, spearheads and large hunting dogs, all things associated with aristocracy and with the *fian*. Deer-hunting was regarded as a sport for the aristocracy and elite of early Irish society.¹⁸⁴ The deer-hunt would then be followed by a feast, at which fine clothing would display social rank or status, after which baths would be provided, perhaps using the fats of the venison or deer skins, all activities that might result in the archaeological evidence described above. Obviously, it is impossible to prove that these were young aristocratic men (or *fian*) with their retainers, who were living at the lake’s edge during their period of marginalisation from society, but it is an intriguing suggestion.

There are also hints in the annals and saints’ lives that islands were used as the dwelling places of these liminal, violent youths. In the *Annals of Ulster* for AD 847, there is an account of the destruction of the island fortress of a *fian* band that had been terrorising the túath.

¹⁸¹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 112-4.

¹⁸² McCone, *Pagan past and Christian present*, p. 205.

¹⁸³ Conor Newman, ‘Ballinderry crannóg No. 2, Co. Offaly: Pre-crannóg early medieval horizon’ in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.* 11 (2002), pp 99-124, at pp 114-6.

Toghal Innsi Loch Muinremair la Mael Sechnaill for finlach mar do maccaibh bais Luigne ocus Galeng ro batar oc indriudh na tuath more gentiliun.

The sack of the island of Loch Muinremair by Máel Sechnaill against a large *fian*-band of sons of death of the Luigni and Gailenga who had been ravaging the *túatha* in the manner of pagans.¹⁸⁵

The entry implies that a *fian*-band was occupying an island or crannog on Lough Ramor, Co. Cavan, out of which they were raiding the local countryside. Ultimately, the king had to go out and crush them to protect the community. Obviously a crannog would be a particularly useful place for such a social group to live, both for its practical military and defensive strengths and for its potential association with 'life at the edge'.

Interestingly, there is a rather similar reference in the Irish *Life* of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise to an incident where the saint intervenes to defeat or quell a socially marginal group who were living on a island in a lake.

'Robui immorro loch ifarradh Ísill 7 noaitreabdais aes tuaithi 7 daescarslúag an innsi bui fair 7 dotharimisedh nual 7 fogur in lochta-sin adtarbha um na clerchíu. Roghuidh Ciaran in Coimdi cor'alta asa hinad in innsi 7 doronad in ní-sin, 7 atcither beos an toinad a roibi isin loch re cuimnigud in ferta-sin'

Now near Ísel there was a lake, and heathens and rabble were living in the island that was upon it. And the shouting and noise of that unprofitable folk used to disturb the clerics. Ciarán entreated the Lord that the island might be moved out of its place, and that thing was done; and still for remembrance of that miracle is seen the place wherein the island was in the lake.¹⁸⁶

It would appear again that islands were being depicted in both the annals and the saints lives as a useful metonym for liminality, social marginality and an existence on the edge, whether this was temporary (in the case of the youthful and violent *fian*) or permanent (in the case of the poor or people who professed pagan beliefs). This would certainly fit with what has been proposed above from the saints' lives, sagas and annals, that islands

¹⁸⁴ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 272-81.

¹⁸⁵ *A.U.* 847.3 translates this as 'Mael Sechnaill destroyed the Island of Loch Muinremor, overcoming there a large band of wicked men of Luigni and Gailenga, who had been plundering the territories in the manner of the heathens.' Here, I use Kim McCone's more recent and more accurate translation of the words, *finlach mar do maccaibh bais* (literally, 'large *fian*-band of sons of death'); Kim McCone 'Werewolves, cyclopes, díberga, and fianna: juvenile delinquency in early Ireland' in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (1986), pp 1-22; On the other hand, Colmán Etchingham has suggested that the actions of people are here merely being compared with true heathens, the *gentiles* (i.e. Vikings), Colmán Etchingham, *Church organisation in Ireland A.D. 650 to 1000* (Naas, 1999), p. 303.

¹⁸⁶ Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, l. 4327, p. 129; The words *aes tuaithi 7 daescarslúag an* could also be translated as 'country folk and servile people'. But this still suggests the perception of islands as places for socially marginal groups, in this case, an island inhabited by poor people who were an irritation to the church authorities.

were often seen as places 'at the edge', marginal, on boundaries and even locations for otherworldly encounters.

Is it not paradoxical though that islands could be places for male saints and kings at the same time as they could places for seemingly socially marginalised groups, such as the poor, the young and even monsters? However, this ignores the fact that liminality is a fluid and mutable concept and that people could be both seeking and avoiding it, according to their social status, gender and place in the community. In the early Middle Ages, the king placed his royal residence on an island to achieve a social distance and a reputation for power. At the same time, he was at the physical and symbolic centre of the early medieval settlement landscape. The lord built his residence on a crannog to emulate the powerful, and to protect his own wealth and that of the community. The poor and socially marginalised may effectively have been doing the same thing, inhabiting places at the edge of land, maintaining their own identity and sense of place, while perhaps also being marginalised by others. Islands were places at the edge, at the same time as they were places at the centre of people's lives.

Conclusions

This chapter has used early Irish hagiographies, voyage tales, adventure tales and annals to begin to reconstruct the cultural understanding and symbolic role of islands (and therefore crannogs) in the early medieval imagination. It argued that islands were often projected as distinctive, often liminal places where social identities could be established, changed and manipulated in different ways. It also explored the character and performance of social identity in early medieval Ireland, suggesting how people may have used islands, places, objects, texts and memories to negotiate and 'play out' ideas about power, social hierarchy, gender, kinship and social marginality. In the next chapter, this study will begin to explore how it might be possible for archaeologists to interpret the social and ideological role of crannogs in the early medieval landscape.

Chapter 5

Islands in watery worlds: A landscape perspective on early medieval crannogs

Introduction

In early medieval Ireland, people lived on crannogs that they had built and maintained out in the watery shallows of lakes. These islands, however distinctive in appearance, should not be viewed as exotic, isolated objects, entirely separated from the rest of the world that these peoples inhabited. In the early medieval period, a person standing on a crannog could easily have seen on the nearby dryland, the domestic world of settlements and dwellings, the symbolic world of churches, holy wells and graveyards, as well as field-systems, roadways, woodlands and the rest of the world of daily life and work. So despite the social distance and physical separation that was certainly achieved by placing a dwelling place on an island on water, it was still only a task of minutes to move out from these islands to the surrounding landscape. It is evident that crannogs need to be investigated within their wider social, economic and ideological landscapes, preferably within a defined region.

Landscape, settlement and society in early medieval Westmeath

Introduction

In exploring the use of crannogs in the early medieval landscape, this chapter focuses on the crannogs of the lakelands of Co. Westmeath. This county is useful for a regional landscape analysis of crannogs for a number of reasons. Firstly, although it is dominated by lakelands, it also has a significant topographical variability, ranging from rolling hills of glacial till to low-lying raised bogs. The use of crannogs in this lakelands region then has as much to do with deliberate human choices and agency, as with the physical landscape.¹ In Westmeath, people definitely chose to build island dwellings out in lakes, whether those lakes were small or large. It should be possible then to explore aspects of crannog use within a wider landscape setting. Secondly, there is rich archaeological and historical evidence for the role of crannogs in the early medieval settlement landscape, which should enable a more nuanced social perspective.

¹ For example, in the drumlin lakelands of south Ulster to the north, crannog building was an almost inevitable consequence of life in a waterlogged landscape of drumlin lakes, ponds, fens and bogs. By contrast, in the midlands, the building of a crannog was a deliberate, almost unlikely decision,

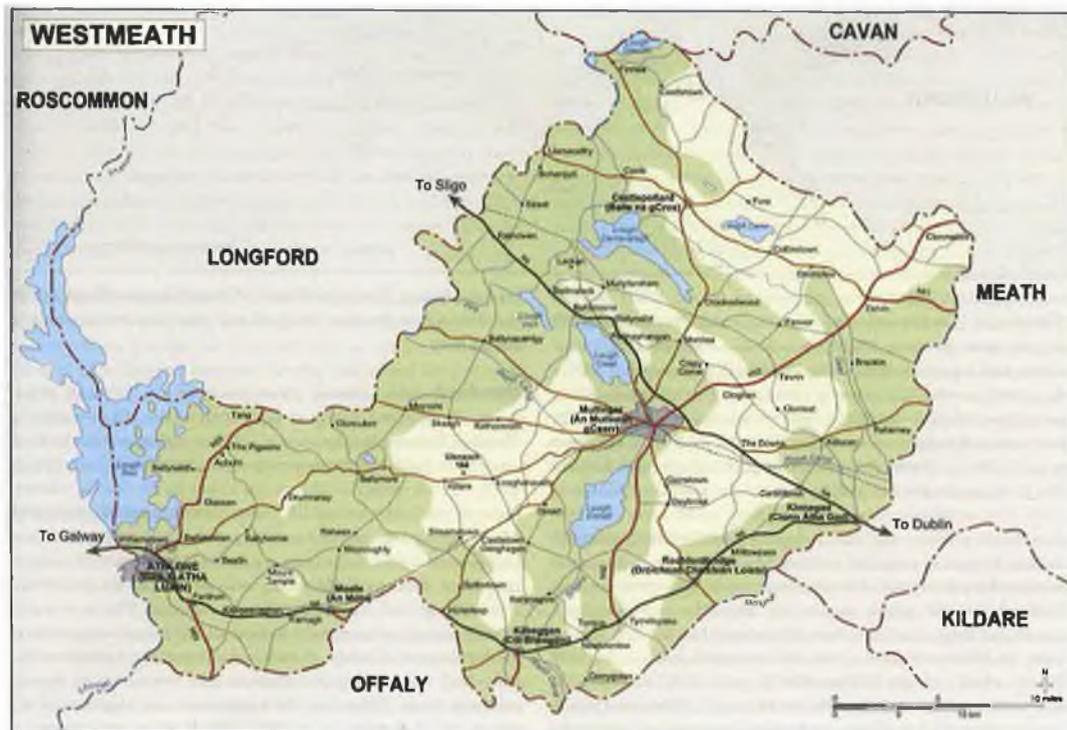


Fig. 5.1 Westmeath is a lowlying county in the north Irish midlands. This map illustrates its principal towns, routeways, lakes, rivers and general topography. (Source *The Encyclopedia of Ireland*, p.1131).

Westmeath is located in the north midlands of Ireland (Fig. 5.1). It occupies an area of 1,838.88 sq. km (710 sq. miles), equivalent to 183,892 ha. It is bordered by Meath (to the east), Offaly (south) Lough Ree and Roscommon (west) and Longford and Cavan (north). Its principal modern towns are Athlone (the effective capital of the midlands), Mullingar, Moate, Tyrellspass, Kilbeggan and Castlepollard. Westmeath was established as a county in 1542, when the shire or county of Meath was divided into two separate eastern and western entities, named Meath and Westmeath. Ten baronies and one half barony (Fore) were incorporated into the new county, which originally consisted of the baronies of Delvin, Moyashell, Magheraterran, Corkaree, Farbill, Moygoish, Rathconrath, Rossagh, Fertullagh, Kilkenny and the half-barony of Fore. Rossagh was later absorbed into neighbouring baronies, while the baronies of Moycashel, Clonlonan and Brawny were included in the sixteenth century. By the time of the Civil Survey of 1654-6, the county's baronies included 'Halfe Foore, Delvin, Moyashell, Magheradernon, Farbill, Fertullagh, Moycashel, Clonlonan, Brawny territory, Kilkenny

allowing us to gain insights into the roles of islands in people's imagination.

West, Rathconrath, Moygoish and Corkery', each with their own parishes and townlands.²

In this study of crannogs in Westmeath, reference will be made particularly to these baronies and their boundaries. This is because it is generally thought that these early modern baronies can be *roughly* equated in size and general location with the petty kingdoms or túatha of early medieval Ireland.³ However, it is likely that subsequent changes in boundaries and sizes makes generalisations with regard to the relationships between the older túatha and the baronies a tricky task, so each territory must be cautiously examined on its merits.⁴ In Westmeath, it is possible to identify several likely early medieval túatha through the use of annalistic sources, hagiographies, placenames, parish and barony boundaries. For example, as will be seen below, the barony of Fartullagh in the southeast probably corresponds broadly to the petty kingdom of the Fir Tulach, whose royal site lay on the shores of Lough Ennell. It is also likely that the barony of Moygoish roughly corresponds to the early medieval territory of the Uí Maicc Uais Mide, on the shores of Lough Derravarragh. Brief mention will also occasionally be made of parish and townland boundaries, both of which now appear to have been of pre-Norman origins as well.

Physical landscape and environment in West meath

Physical topography, rivers and lakes

Westmeath is a low-lying county, in keeping with most of the midlands of Ireland. It has only a few low hills, mostly in the northern end of the county in the barony of Fore (e.g. The Hill of Moat at 251m, Knockeyon at 215m, the Hill of Fore at 187m), as well as in the adjoining baronies of Corkaree and Farbill. The rest of the county is generally level, broken here and there by gently rolling glacially-derived kame and kettle hills and sandy esker ridges. There are some raised bogs, particularly in the south and east.

Most of the county is drained by the River Shannon drainage basin. The northwest is drained by the River Inny (which flows south-westwards into the Shannon at Lough Ree). This river lies on the county boundary with Co. Longford to the north (and was traditionally the political boundary between early medieval Mide and Tethbae). To the

² P.W. Joyce, *Phillips atlas and geography of Ireland* (London, 1883), pp 51-3, pl. 31; Walsh, *The placenames of Westmeath*, pp xii-xiii; D.L. Swan, 'The Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath' in John Bradley (ed.), *Settlement and society in medieval Ireland* (Kilkenny, 1988), pp 3-32, at pp 5-6.

³ Stout, 'Early Christian settlement, society and economy in Offaly', p. 29.

⁴ A.P. Smyth, *Celtic Leinster: Towards an historical geography of early Irish civilisation, A.D.*

southwest, the landscape is largely drained by various rivers draining into the River Shannon, particularly the River Brosna, which flows southwards through Co. Offaly before flowing out into the Shannon. To the east, the county is drained by several tributaries of the River Boyne (e.g. River Blackwater, River Adeel).

Westmeath has long been known by travellers, artists and poets for its lakelands (Fig. 5.2).⁵ It has a range of lakes, varying in location, size, depth and overall appearance.⁶ Indeed, as the north midland lakelands region is essentially centred on this county, fishing and tourism on the lakes is a significant aspect of the modern economy. Lough Ree, the largest lake on the upper River Shannon, lies partly on the county's western boundary. Near its shores, within the barony of Kilkenny West, lie the smaller basin lakes of Doonis Lough, Creggan, Makeegan, Waterstown, Robin's Lake and Twy Lough. Crannogs are known from Doonis Lough and Twy Lough at least. In the southwest of the county is Lough Sewdy (formerly known as Lough Sunderlin), a small lake around which there are several natural islands and a possible crannog.

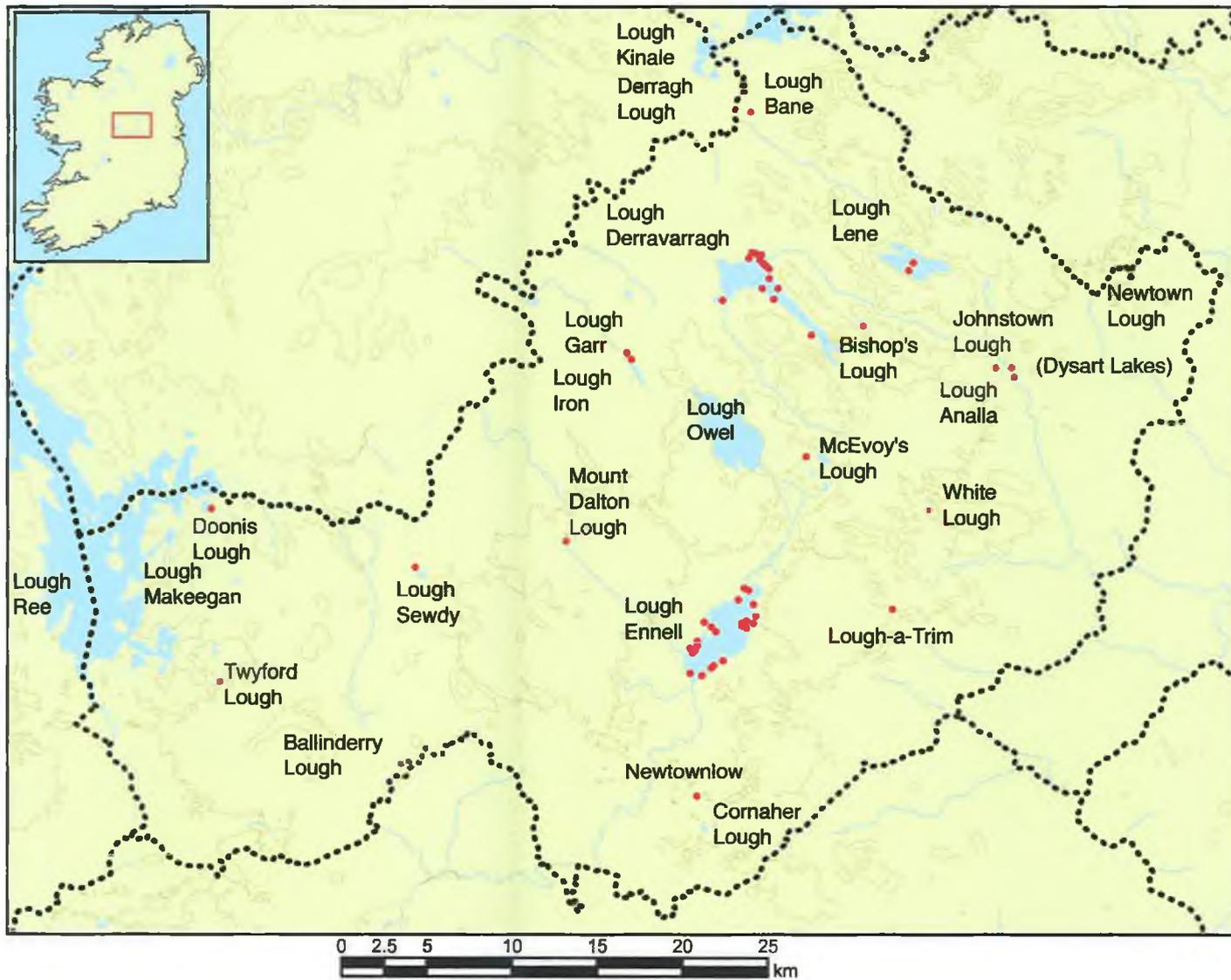
Lough Sheelin, Lough Kinale, Lough Derravarragh and Lough Iron are all quite large lakes in the northern part of the county, located on the River Inny, which flows from the north-east in a south-west direction to end up in Lough Ree. Both Lough Sheelin and Lough Kinale lie on the county's northern boundary, although they are mostly within the counties of Longford and Cavan respectively. Lough Derravarragh, surrounded by topography ranging from raised bogs to high, steep-sided hills, is a long, narrow lough almost 8km (5 miles) in length covering an area of 1080 hectares. At the north, it is broad and shallow (c.1-2m), while its southern end is narrow and deep (i.e. c.20m water depth). Lough Derravarragh has a rich archaeological landscape, with evidence for lakeshore activities in the Late Mesolithic, the Late Bronze/Iron Age and the early medieval period in particular. There are at least 18 crannogs around the lake, many of which show evidence for activity between the seventh and the eleventh century AD. Lough Derravarragh will be the focus of particular attention in this study. Lough Iron, a long narrow lake, lies further downstream on the River Inny.

500-1600 (Dublin, 1982), p. 70.

⁵ Henry Pier's seventeenth-century description of Westmeath begins with a discourse about the county's various lakes and rivers; Henry Piers, *A chorographical description of the county of Westmeath* (Dublin, 1786, second edition, facsimile reprint, Tara, 1981), pp 3-19.

⁶ Westmeath County Council, *County Westmeath: Ireland's undiscovered lakeland* (Mullingar, 1997); Midlands-East Regional Tourism Authority *Pike fishing: Midlands of Ireland* (Mullingar, n.d.); Midlands-East Regional Tourism Authority, *Midland trout loughs* (Mullingar, n.d.)

Fig. 5.2. Westmeath's lakelands, illustrating the distribution of crannogs in the county.



Lough Owel is a large, expansive lake in the middle of the county, 6km in length by 3km width (1100ha in area) north of Mullingar. It is a deep lake, with comparatively few shallows (apart from along its southern shore). Interestingly, although there is much later prehistoric settlement and ritual activity (e.g. barrows, standing stones) on its western shore, and some medieval churches on its natural islands (e.g. Church Island), there are no as yet recorded crannogs on the lake. Also to the north of Mullingar are the small, connected lakes of McEvoy's Lough, Lough Slevin, Lough Sheever and Lough Drin.

Lough Ennell is located 4km south of Mullingar, is 7km in length by 4km width covering an area of 1300 ha. It has a huge area of shallow water, and almost 50 per cent is under 3m in depth. It has several natural islands (Dysart Island, Inchcrone, Cherry Island) which were attached to the land following land drainage schemes in the 1950s. There are at least 22 known crannogs on the lake, and it is surrounded by a rich early medieval secular and ecclesiastical landscape.

Finally, in the northeast of the county, there are several lakes of varying size, most of which are on the drainage system or catchment of the River Boyne. Lough Lene is a large lake between Castlepollard and Collinstown. It has several natural islands (including Turgesius Island and Nun's Island) and at least one early medieval crannog (Castle Island). There are also several smaller lakes nearby in this northeast area, namely Lough Glore, White Lough, Lough Bane and Newtown Lough, the latter three on the boundary with Meath. To the south of Lough Lene are the Dysart Lakes, a group of several connected water-bodies, the largest of which is Lough Annala. There are at least three crannogs in the area (Johnstown Lough, Dysart Lough).

Bedrock geology

The bedrock geology of the region, mostly overlain by an undulating topography of glacial deposits is almost totally dominated by Carboniferous Limestone.⁷ Because of these deep deposits of glacial drift, only occasionally does bedrock protrude above the surface, either as limestone reefs on hilltops or as bedrock outcrops around lakeshores. The oldest rocks are in the north, a series of inliers of Ordovician and Silurian rocks (slates and greywackes) which protrude through the more recent Carboniferous strata.

⁷ Catherine Delaney, 'Pre-Quaternary geology' in F.J.G. Mitchell and C. Delaney (eds.), *The Quaternary of the Irish midlands. Field Guide No. 21, Irish Association for Quaternary Studies* (Dublin, 1997), pp 7-9 ; M. Geraghty, C. MacDermott and D.C. Smith, *Longford-Roscommon - Sheet 12. Geological survey of Ireland: Bedrock geology 1:1000,000 Map series* (Dublin, 1999).

These are overlain by Old Red Sandstone of Lower Carboniferous age, mostly of sandstones and conglomerates with quartz cobbles. These ORS rocks are conformably overlain by Lower Carboniferous Dinantian limestones. In the north, they are sandy, while southwards they are succeeded by Waulsortian Complex limestones. This lower limestone series is generally pure, but the middle and upper series contain a proportion of shale. Upper Carboniferous (Namurian) succession limestones outcrop in the east, underlying the lakeland zone from Lough Ennell to Lough Sheelin. Particularly prevalent across this zone are Visean Lucan formation (dark limestones and shale) and Derravarragh cherts (cherty limestone, minor shale) limestones. In essence then, limestone dominates Westmeath and rock exposures are infrequent. Interestingly, on hilltops like Knockeyon, at Lough Derravarragh, chert is exposed as bands within the limestone, and this may well have been quarried in early prehistory, perhaps even by the Mesolithic hunter-gatherers who occupied the opposite end of the lake.⁸

Quaternary geology

The topography of Westmeath is dominated by undulating sands and gravels deposited towards the end of the last stage of the Late Midlandian glaciation (c.24,000-20,000 BP).⁹ This Quaternary geology comprised an extensive suite of glacial and glaciofluvial depositional landforms, varying from north to south (Fig. 5.3). The readvance of the Midlandian glaciation covered the north of the county, pushing as far southeast as a moraine at Athlone and ran northeast by the Hill of Uisnech to Bunbrosna.

In the northwest of the county are some drumlins and elongated hills, oriented NW-SE, indicating ice flow to the southeast. The narrow, shallow valleys in which Lough Derravarragh, Lough Glore and Lough Lene lie also appear to be ice-gouged valleys between the cherty harder hills on either side and seem to have been sculpted by this iceflow. Throughout this area are also a number of meltwater channels, all trending south and south-eastwards.

⁸ This author has recently discovered a possible early prehistoric chert quarry on a limestone cliff face at the top of Knockeyon, at the southeast end of Lough Derravarragh.

⁹ Catherine Delaney, 'Quaternary geology' in F.J.G. Mitchell and C. Delaney (eds.), *The Quaternary of the Irish midlands. Field Guide No. 21, Irish Association for Quaternary Studies* (Dublin, 1997), pp 10-11.

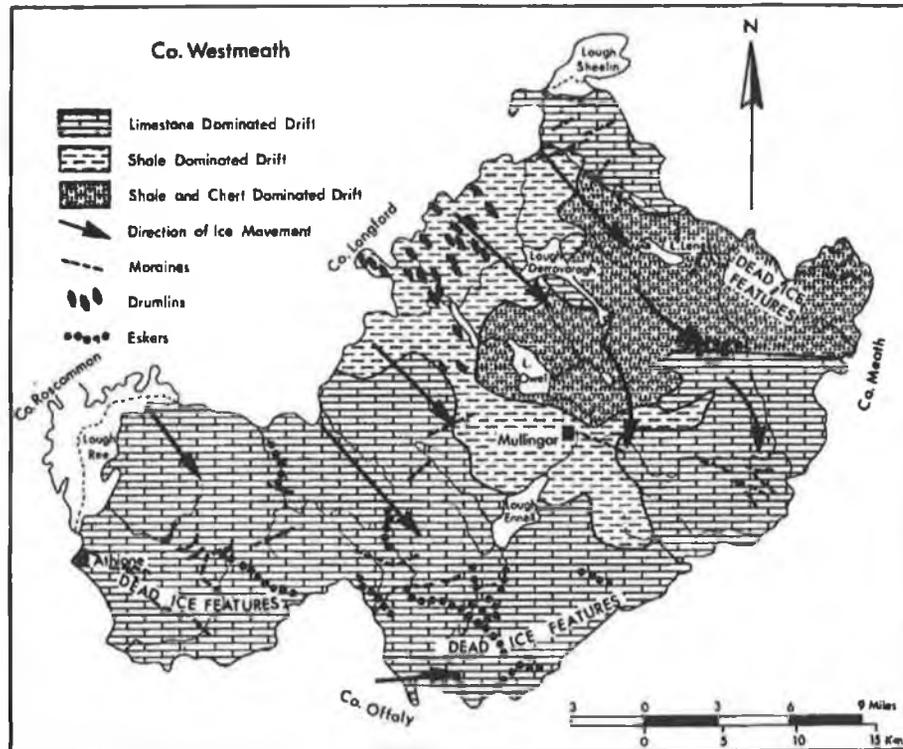


Fig. 5.3. Westmeath, map illustrating quaternary geology, drumlins, eskers and glacial drifts (Source: T.F. Finch Soils of Co. Westmeath (Dublin, 1977), Fig.4).

To the south of this region lies an area of mixed fluvioglacial and till deposits left by disintegrating ice. As the ice withdrew northwards, hummocky end moraines developed creating small, isolated recessional moraines usually less than a kilometre in length. These small moraines (typically oriented NW-SE) indicate water transport south-eastwards and today are often used for local roads and lanes. Along the south of the county is a region of larger eskers and kame and kettle hills, frequently lying within raised bogs and alluvial deposits. These eskers formed in melt-water tunnels within or under the glacier, which when the ice disappeared emerged as sand and gravel running across the land, but bearing no relation to local topography. In general, these eskers are oriented N-S, while to the southwest of Lough Ennell, they are generally trending NW-SE or E-W. These eskers were significant topographical features in the settlement landscape of Westmeath, often providing the basis for significant routeways, such as the early medieval *Eiscir Riada* on the Offaly/Westmeath border, while smaller, bifurcated eskers in the region of Tyrellspass, Kilbeggan and Moate also provided routeway of roads, lanes and pathways through the county's raised bogs and hummocky wetlands.

Glacial drifts across the county include shale-dominated drifts in the middle and north around Lough Sheelin. The ice that overran the hills around Lough Derravarragh and

Lough Lene (e.g. Hill of Fore, Knockeyon, etc) became charged with cherty limestone debris. The cherty till deposited by this ice reaches southeast of these lakes as far as the east shore of Lough Ennell. The limestone areas north of Athlone and east across the county are uniform in lithology, so that limestone drift predominates.¹⁰

Soils

In Westmeath, the bedrock geology of limestone, the presence of a limestone-rich glacial till and the generally good drainage has led to the formation of good agricultural soils across most of the county.¹¹ Grey-brown podzolic soils predominate (i.e. 50.4 per cent of total area). These are generally a good all-purpose soil, typically being a moderately well draining, 'heavy' soil with significant clay content. Across the southern half of the county, these grey brown podzolic soils are predominantly of the Patrickwell series, the most common soil in the county (i.e. 30.4 per cent of land area), suitable for both tillage and pasture, although they need to be well managed. Across the north, middle and northeast of the county (around the lakes of Lough Owel, Lough Iron, Lough Derravarragh and Lough Lene), they are typically of the Rathowen Cherty phase. These have a slightly more limited use range. They are good soils when properly manured and managed, but they have a weak structure and a high water-holding clay content. This means that if they are grazed when wet, they tend to break up and compact (a process known as poaching). They are generally used for cattle and sheep pasture.

Westmeath also has relatively large areas of peat deposits (14.29 per cent of total area). These are mostly raised bogs that have formed over the last 10,000 years, following local and regional sequences of fens, basin peats and raised bogs. These are acidic, very waterlogged and low in nutrients and have very limited land-use suitabilities. Raised bogs, many of which have been cut over by traditional methods and modern peat production, are extensively found along the northwest county boundary (adjacent to Co. Longford), running northwards from Lough Derravarragh towards Lough Kinale. There are also large areas of bogs along the southern boundary of the county fringing Co. Offaly and eastwards towards Co. Meath. Around most of the lakes, there are also extensive fen peats, many reclaimed and used today as rough pasture. The obstacle these bogs and fens caused to east-west travel can be seen in particular at Lough Ennell, where at both ends of the lake, there were once large raised bogs and fens stretching to both north and south from the lake. There are also many small areas of raised bog and fen in local smaller basins around the county.

¹⁰ T.F. Finch, *Soils of Co. Westmeath* (Dublin, 1977), pp 7-9.

There are also relatively large areas of Mineral Soil Complex, where the delineation between different soils cannot so easily be drawn or mapped at a small scale. These are usually related to topographical features produced by glacial drift. For example, on eskers, brown earths tend to be found on top, with grey brown podzolics found on the lower slopes. Gley soils are also occasional (6.76 per cent of land area), found in areas with a high water-table. Other soils in the county include brown earths (0.72 per cent land area), rendzinas (0.11 per cent land area, over limestone bedrock) and lithosols (frequent but not extensive) found on the crests of cherty limestone hills.

Traditionally, Westmeath has been primarily a dry-stock or beef cattle farming county, with dairying, sheep, pigs and tillage playing a supporting role. Until recent times, calves and yearling cattle were imported (often from the south midlands and Munster) into the county, fattened and moved on for finishing elsewhere. The development of intensive cattle production farms has meant that cattle are often now raised there until slaughter age. Dairying, never very significant, started to expand in recent times supported by EU grants, but sheep, pig and horse raising have declined. Some tillage included the growing of wheat and barley.

Climate

Westmeath has a mild, wet climate today, with moist winters and cool, cloudy summers.¹² Prevailing winds are westerly to south-westerly, and often raise large stormy waves on the county's larger lakes (i.e. Lough Ree, Lough Derravarragh, Lough Owel, and Lough Ennell). Average humidity is high and annual rainfall exceeds 800mm a year. Because of the absence of large variations in elevation, the mean annual precipitation varies little within the county. Rainfall tends to be higher towards the west and north and is evenly distributed over the year, with a minimum occurring in April and a maximum in December. This high rainfall combines with Westmeath's general low-lying topography and poor drainage (see above), to produce a landscape that is rich in wetland environments, particularly those of raised bogs, fens and lakes.

Mean daily air temperatures range from between 1.1-6.6⁰C in January to between 14.8-19⁰C in August. Grass growth begins in early March, stopping in the latter part of November. Frosts can occur from late October to early May. The climate in the early medieval period was probably broadly similar to that of today, although it may have

¹¹ Finch, *Soils of Co. Westmeath*, pp. 15-38.

been warmer and dryer in the fifth century AD, before becoming colder and wetter in the sixth and seventh century. By the eighth century, the early medieval climate of Ireland may have broadly corresponded to today's, perhaps being even better. In fact, climate during the early medieval period was benign, permitting a long growing season that enabled almost year around grass growth and supported the dairying economy, and cattle could be kept out in the fields during the winter (although occasional extreme cold snaps did cause the deaths of livestock).

Palaeoecological history

Intriguingly, despite the abundance of waterlogged deposits in the midland's lakelands, fens and bogs, there has been relatively little attempt to investigate the post-glacial palaeoecological history of the region.¹³ Previous pollen studies that have been carried out in the region include Mitchell's pioneering studies at Ballynakill, Co. Offaly,¹⁴ O'Connell's study at Scragh Bog, Co. Westmeath (a small basin fen between Lough Owel and Lough Ennell)¹⁵ and analyses of the palaeoecology of prehistoric trackways at Corlea, Co. Longford (north of the Westmeath/Longford border).¹⁶ However, the Westmeath lakelands region itself is poorly covered by the Scragh Bog study, as it is not radiocarbon-dated and it was largely focused on the evidence from the early prehistoric levels. However, it did have some evidence for probable historic woodland clearance and the introduction of rye crops at the onset of the early Middle Ages.¹⁷ Fortunately, two PhD candidates in the Dept. of Botany, Trinity College have recently carried out palaeoecological studies at Cornaher Lough, Co. Westmeath and Clara Bog, Co. Offaly.¹⁸

In regional terms, all these studies broadly agree, indicating tantalising hints of human activity in the Mesolithic (i.e. expansion of hazel cover and charcoal production). Thereafter, there is a slow, gradual increase in human activity across early prehistory

¹² Finch, *Soils of Co. Westmeath*, pp 3-5.

¹³ It is intriguing to note that most pollen studies in Ireland have been carried out away from the midlands, particularly towards the western and southern regions of Connacht and Munster.

¹⁴ G.F. Mitchell, 'Studies in Irish Quaternary deposits: No. 7' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 53b (1951), pp 111-206.

¹⁵ Michael O'Connell, 'The development history of Scragh Bog, Co. Westmeath and the vegetational history of its hinterland' in *New Phytologist* 85 (1980), pp 301-19.

¹⁶ C. Caseldine, J. Hatton, A. Caseldine, U. Huber, R. Chiverrell and N. Woolley, 'Palaeoecological studies at Corlea, 1988-1992' in Barry Raftery, *Trackway excavations in the Mount Dillon bogs, Co. Longford, 1985-1991: Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit Trans. 3* (Dublin, 1996), pp 379-94.

¹⁷ Hall, 'the vegetational history of the Irish landscape', pp 359, p. 368.

¹⁸ Fraser Mitchell, 'Palaeoecology' in F.J.G. Mitchell and C. Delaney (eds.), *The Quaternary of the Irish midlands. Field Guide No. 21, Irish Association for Quaternary Studies* (Dublin, 1997), pp 15-18.

following an elm decline after 4000 BC, with woodland clearance particularly noticeable in the Middle to Late Bronze Age, followed by an Iron Age 'lull', to be succeeded by increased woodland clearance and farming activity after c. AD 400. Thereafter, despite brief periods of woodland regrowth (for example, at about AD 1000), there is an image of a landscape that was progressively more clear of woodlands, with almost complete deforestation in the sixteenth and seventeenth century AD. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the introduction of new, exotic tree species, such as beech, lime and Scots pine indicates the plantation of woodlands on new Anglo-Irish estates.

At Clara Bog, Co. Offaly, detailed pollen analysis suggests that there was relatively little agricultural activity or woodland clearance until later prehistory.¹⁹ In the early Neolithic, there is certainly evidence for a decline in *Ulmus* (elm) but little agricultural indicators, suggesting that it was caused by disease. A low-level impact on woodlands begins in the Late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age, but it is never large or consistent. In fact, it is not until the Middle/Late Bronze Age (i.e. c.1200 BC) that there is any real expansion in agricultural activity, when larger canopy trees decline; yet *Taxus* (yew) and *Corylus* (hazel) remain in place. In fact, the first large-scale woodland clearance, intensive agricultural practices and cereal cultivation only really occur in the Late Bronze Age/early Iron Age (after c.900 BC). There is then a 200 to 300 year period of woodland recovery and a low level of human activity throughout a late Iron Age 'lull' (c. AD 110-420). It is probable that farming was being practiced during the Iron Age, as there are cereal grains in the pollen profiles, but this tillage activity may have been going on at a reduced scale (perhaps due to soil exhaustion, a population decrease or a change in farming practices). Indeed, elm, ash and yew woodlands expanded. This period of woodland regrowth co-incides with a change in the Clara Bog peat profile from a highly humified peat to a relatively poorly humified peat, suggesting a period of increased wetness and climatic deterioration. However, with the onset of the historic period (at c. AD 420, or c.1580 B.P.), there is palaeoenvironmental evidence for a population increase, an intensification of agricultural practices and a widespread clearance of woodland for pasture and tillage. As trees and woodland decline, there is a corresponding rise in weeds and herbs such as *Plantago* spp., *Rumex*, *Urtica* and spores of *Pteridium*, indicating an increasingly open landscape with weeds growing alongside cultivated fields. However, oak and alder remained common, as did hazel, suggesting the presence of discrete areas of woodland at the edges of farmland, and perhaps also coppice and hedgerows.

¹⁹ Andrew Connolly, 'The palaeoecology of Clara Bog, Co. Offaly'. Unpublished PhD thesis.

At Cornaher Lough, Co. Westmeath, a pollen study conducted by Alyson Heery is particularly important to this study, as it was carried out within the Westmeath lakelands, in a location known to be rich in early medieval settlement evidence (Fig. 5.4). The site was a small kettle-lake adjacent to the Long Hill esker and was located 2.2km southeast of the early medieval crannog of Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath (itself located by the esker). Unfortunately, relatively little attention is paid in Heery's study to the historic period, but it does provide useful insights into local vegetation history in the Middle Ages.²⁰

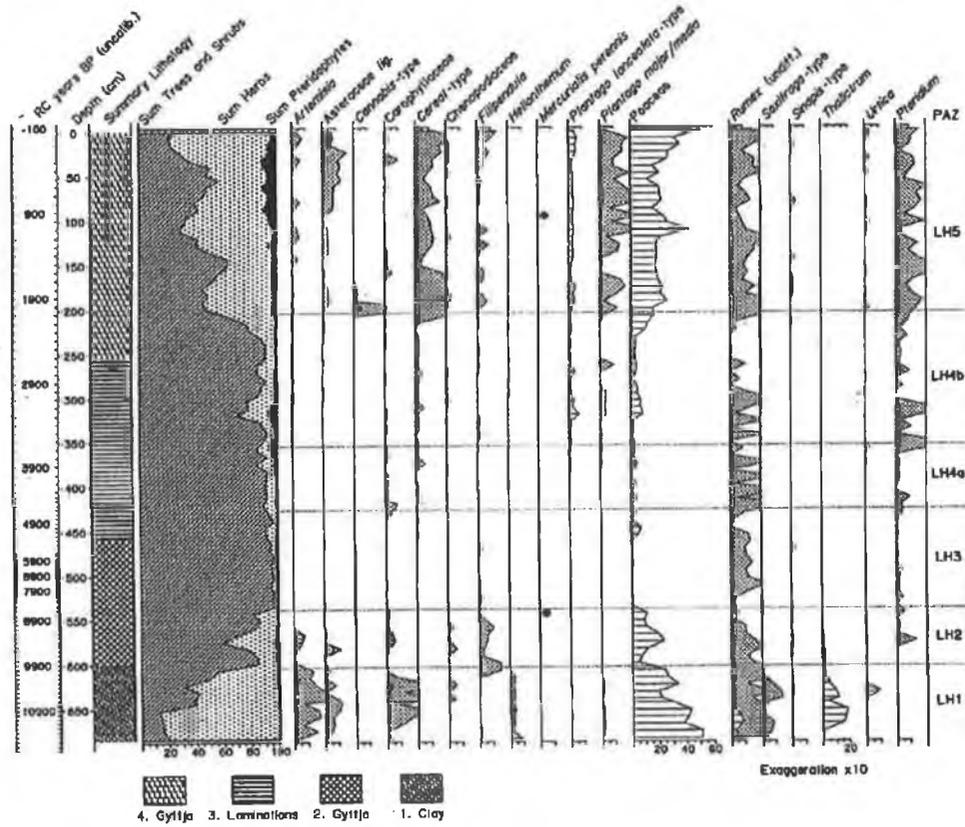
In agreement with other pollen diagrams from the north midlands, the Cornaher Lough study indicates that there was an elm decline in the Neolithic (at 4400 BP), with a coincident expansion in hazel, oak, ash and yew as other species invaded the gaps in the woodland. There is a pine decline at 3600 BP, marking this species' extinction. Neolithic anthropogenic indicators include a rise in cereal type pollen and *Plantago lanceolata*, corresponding with a peak in macroscopic charcoal (indicating fires in the woodlands) and macrofossil indicators of soil inwash into the lake (possibly due to agricultural activity on the esker).

However, it is not until the Middle/Late Bronze Age that there is a sustained clearance of woodland, with oak, elm, yew and alder diminishing and a rise in plant indicators of soil cultivation: *Poaceae*, *Rumex*, *Artemisia*, *Plantago Lanceolata*. There is also macrofossil plant evidence for a climatic deterioration at end of the Late Bronze Age, with wetter conditions prevailing around the lake. As elsewhere, there is palynological evidence for a marked decline in human activity and a recovery of woodland in the Iron Age (between c.300 BC and AD 350).

(Trinity College, Dublin, 1999), pp 241-50.

²⁰ Alyson Heery, 'The vegetation history of the Irish midlands: Palaeoecological reconstructions of two lake sites adjacent to eskers'. Unpublished PhD thesis. (Trinity College, Dublin 1998), pp 52-108; A preliminary pollen profile from Cornaher Lough is published in Mitchell, 'Palaeoecology', Fig. 5.

Percentage summary herbaceous pollen taxa from Cornaher Lough (LH)



Percentage summary arboreal pollen diagram from Cornaher Lough (LH)

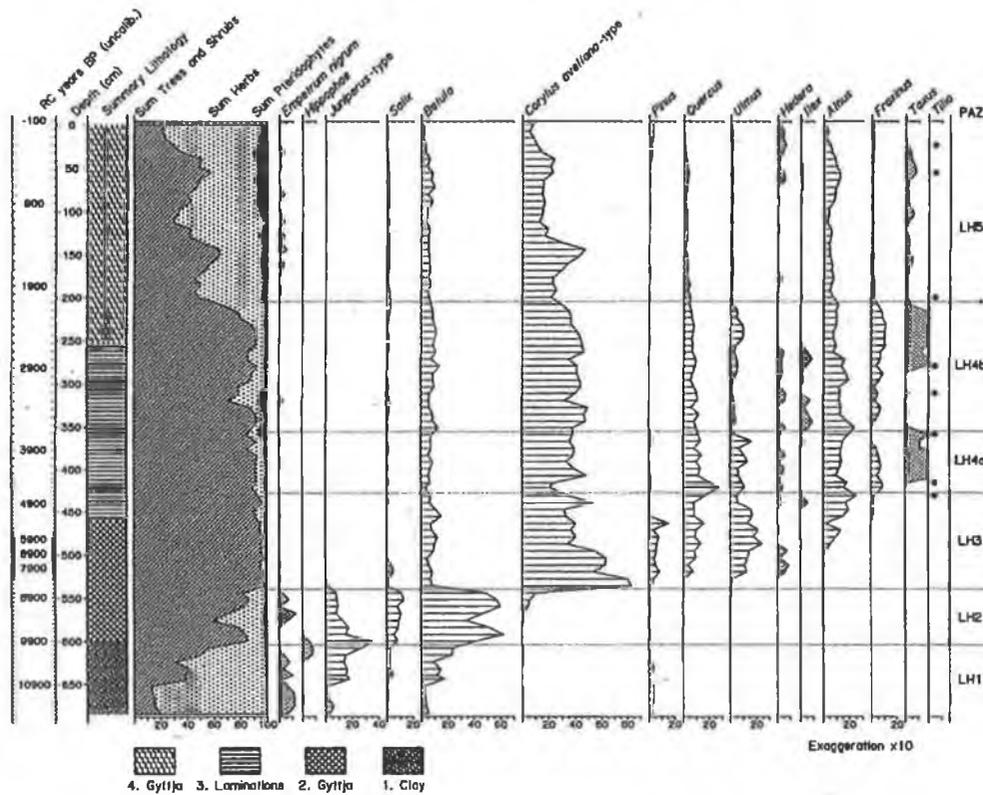


Fig. 5.4. Percentage summary arboreal and herbaceous pollen taxa from Cornaher Lough, south of Newtownlow crannog, Co. Westmeath (Source: Heery, 'The vegetation history of the Irish midlands', Fig. 2.8b, Fig. 2.8c).

However, at the onset of the early medieval period (after c. AD 400), the tree and non-arboreal pollen evidence, charcoal levels and macrofossil plant indicators all show an explosion in the clearance of woodland (of hazel in particular, while oak, birch, elm, ash, yew and alder all decrease too). At the same time, there is a contemporary increase in *Poaceae* and *Cyperaceae*, suggesting an increase in grasses, ribwort plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*), bracken and cereal type pollens. There is also evidence for soils inwashing into the lake and an increase in fen conditions, possibly due to water eutrophication caused by the soil inwash. Thereafter, woodlands are in continuous decline around Cornaher Lough throughout the historic period, apart from a brief period of woodland regeneration at c. AD 1100 (perhaps contemporary with first phase of abandonment of Newtownlow crannog) and through the thirteenth or fourteenth century AD (perhaps suggesting a decline in the Anglo-Norman colony at Newtownlow). However, this early medieval clearance does not approach the massive impact on the woodlands in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (possibly for local ironworks), while the eighteenth century saw the introduction of lime, Scots pine and beech, probably as they were being planted on local Anglo-Irish estates.

There are a number of points to make about even this brief palaeoecological history of Westmeath lakelands. Firstly, it suggests that parts of the lakeland zone were only being settled intensively in Middle/Late Bronze Age and the early medieval period (and thereafter, obviously). There are hints then from the archaeological and palaeoecological record that some parts of the midlands lakelands zone (particularly the lakes, woods and marshes) may largely have been an empty or abandoned landscape prior to the fifth century AD.

It is possible that it is not until the early Middle Ages that people started to actively colonise these places again (perhaps as the political expansion of the southern Uí Néill in Mide forced earlier tribal groups into marginal areas). Perhaps the building and occupation of crannogs were an aspect of this renewed movement into the wetlands. The Clara Bog and Cornaher Lough study also agree with other Irish palaeoecological studies from the early medieval period, which have confirmed this general image of increased agricultural activity after c. AD 400. There are occasional regenerations of woodland (at c. AD 1100, or AD 1350), but even then arable and pastoral agricultural indicators continue at high values through the early medieval period. Although at some sites, this appears to largely indicate an interest in livestock rather than tillage, it is also clear that wheat, barley, oats and sometimes rye was being grown through the first

millennium AD.²¹ It is now evident that early medieval communities in the region were also participating in this island-wide woodland clearance and increased agricultural activity. Nevertheless, there must still have been places out at 'the edge', occasionally including some lakeshores and boggy wildernesses. On the other hand, watery places were not marginal, as people were clearly inhabiting both the wetlands and the esker and hillslopes surrounding them.

Physical landscape and environment on Lough Derravarragh

Introduction

If a regional perspective provides various insights into the use of crannogs in early medieval Westmeath, a local perspective on Lough Derravarragh also enables the exploration of the realities of life around a particular lakeshore. My own recent archaeological surveys indicate that there are at least 18 crannogs on Lough Derravarragh. These vary significantly in their siting, size, morphology and appearance (see Appendix 2). Lough Derravarragh, a distinctive and beautiful lake in north Westmeath, has long been noted by travellers, antiquaries and poets across the Irish midlands (Fig. 5.5).²²

It is surrounded by a strikingly diverse physical landscape, with a varying topography, geology, soils and lakebed conditions. It is a long, narrow lough almost 8km (5 miles) in length covering an area of over 1080 hectares (2700 acres). It is broad and shallow at its north end, and narrow and deep at its southern end. Lough Derravarragh is also interesting in terms of political boundaries. It serves as the modern boundary between the baronies of Fore, Moygoish and Corkaree. It is possible that in the early middle ages the lake itself served as a boundary between the early medieval *túath* or petty kingdoms of the Uí Maccu Uais Midi (Moygoish), the Corco Roíde (Corkaree) and the Coille Follamain and Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair (in the barony of Fore). In the early medieval period, it was also on the regional boundary (effectively the River Inny) between the Clann Cholmáin controlled over-kingdoms of Mide and those of the Cairpre and Máine in south Tethbae (see below for detailed discussion).

²¹ G.F. Mitchell and M. Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape* (Dublin, 1997), pp 248-51, 281-8; Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, pp 39-47; Michael Ryan, 'Furrows and browse: some archaeological thoughts on agriculture and population in early medieval Ireland' in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: Studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), pp 30-6.

²² See Jeremiah Sheehan, *Westmeath: As others saw it* (Moate, 1982) for various descriptions and accounts of Lough Derravarragh.



Fig. 5.5. Aerial photograph of Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. In the foreground, the hills of Knockbrody, Knockross and Knockeyon (to the right) rise steeply from the narrow, deep, southeast end of the lake. In the middle distance, there are gentle slopes, while in the distance, the broad, shallow northwest end of the lake is fringed by raised bogs and fens (Photo: Aerofilms Ltd).

Bedrock geology on Lough Derravarragh

Lough Derravarragh is located across a regional geological boundary in north Westmeath, albeit within the carboniferous limestones typical of the bedrock of Westmeath. The northwest end of the lake lies across a Lucan formation of dark limestone and shale (calp). The southeast end of the lake lies across Derravarragh Cherts of cherty limestone and minor shale. These are particularly well exposed as chert bands within the limestone cliffs that can be seen on the eroding outcrops on the uppermost southeast side of Knockeyon hill.²³

At the north end of the lake, there is also a local exposure of mudbank limestones, with

²³ David Drew, 'Landforms and hydrology of the Co. Westmeath 'lakeland' area' in F.J.G. Mitchell and C. Delaney (eds.), *The Quaternary of the Irish midlands. Field Guide No. 21, Irish Association*

massive grey micritic limestone. The original nineteenth-century geological field maps held in the Geological Survey of Ireland note the presence of spectacular fossils in this stone and there is local information about deep limestone caves beneath the surface. This bedrock creates a large amount of limestone blocks and stone in the soil, as can be seen on the rocky foreshores exposed by modern drainage schemes. The presence of this stone had a profound affect on the crannogs of the lake.

Quaternary geology on Lough Derravarragh

This bedrock around Lough Derravarragh is overlain by a drift mantle laid down by the most recent ice sheets that covered the country. The Midlandian (Weichsel) Glaciation covered north Westmeath, leaving drifts dominated by limestone, shale or shale and chert and the boundary between these zones is again situated at the lough. The orientation of drumlins to the northwest, as well as various striae on the cherty limestone hills between the lakes, indicates that ice flowed across the north of the county in a north-west-southeast orientation. Lough Derravarragh looks like an ice-gouged lake between the harder cherty hills on either side. A meltwater channel flows southwards from the lake, with which there is today a lowlying river valley surrounded by fen peats. There is also a retreat moraine located to the southeast of the lake, in the vicinity of Crookedwood.²⁴

Soils and drainage at Lough Derravarragh

Lough Derravarragh is also situated on a boundary between different soil conditions, although these are mostly different types of grey brown podzolic soils. Along the southwest shoreline, there are predominantly Grey Brown Podzolics (Patrickwells 60) derived from limestone till. Within this area, there are also smaller pockets of Gleys (Street 2002), derived from shale and limestone till. Broadly similar are the soils across the lake on the northeast side, again predominantly Grey Brown Podzolics (Rathowen cherty phase – 200c), derived from shale, limestone and chert till. On Derrya island, to the north, there are also poorer-quality Gleys (Street 2002), derived from shale and limestone till. However, to the northwest and west, soil conditions are radically different. From the north end of Lough Derravarragh there stretches an extensive region of raised bog which reaches up as far as Lough Kinale, Co. Longford. These bogs flank the River Inny, around which there are also fen peats. If Lough Derravarragh was a barrier to east-west travel, then these raised bogs and riverine fens effectively extend

for *Quaternary Studies* (Dublin, 1997), pp 64-9.

²⁴ Delaney, 'Pre-Quaternary geology' in Mitchell and Delaney (eds.), *The Quaternary of the Irish midlands*. pp 7-9.

this barrier for kilometres to the north.

Interestingly, there are also two places along the northern shore of the lake which are effectively islands of soil. These are in Clonava (a large island of grey brown podzolics over shale and limestone till (Rathowen 200) and in Derrya (an island of grey brown podzolics and gleys over limestone and shale till). Former bogs and fens surround these, and although reclamation has placed these contiguous to dryland today, in the past they would have been wooded islands in a vast mosaic of wetlands. There is also another 'island' of local soil conditions in the southeast. This is on the top and southern sides of Knockeyon, the steep-sided hill that rises out of the shores of the lake. On top of the hill is a thin lithosol (Knockeyon – 204) over a chert bedrock, adjacent to a brown earth (Ladestown 199) derived from fluvio-glacial limestone, shale and chert.²⁵

Environment on Lough Derravarragh

The modern landscape around Lough Derravarragh is mostly given over to cattle and sheep grazing, with large, rectangular fields sloping down to the shore. Owing to the take-up of EU grants in the 1970s, these fields have largely been reclaimed and have been cleared of stone and bushes and ploughed deeply. Indeed, this had a highly significant impact on archaeology in the 1970s, as numerous earthworks and ringforts have been removed.

Although the landscape is generally open (particularly towards the northern end), there are also close woodlands of alder, hazel and willow along the shore. On the steep, heavily wooded slopes of the hills of Knockeyon, Knockcross and Knockbrody at the southeast end, these are largely natural oak, yew and hazel woods, densely grown and largely unexplored.

There are also a rich flora and fauna around the lakeshore. During archaeological fieldwork, I have often seen foxes (one of whom stood right beside me one morning, watching me record a crannog at Kiltoom), hares and rabbits. The lough is also a significant habitat for wild birds. Swans are common. Indeed, during the winter, thousands of migratory Swans colonise the area, coming from as far away as Russia and Siberia.²⁶

²⁵ Finch, *Soils of Co. Westmeath*, pp. 15-38.

²⁶ Lough Derravarragh, as well as its swans, is best-known to most Irish people as a venue for key events in the fifteenth-century migratory legend known as *Oidheadh Chlainne Lir* ('the Tragic Fate of the Children of Lir'); Ó hÓgáin, *Myth, legend and romance: an encyclopaedia of the Irish folk tradition*, pp 271-2; Caoimhín Breatnach, 'The religious significance of Oidheadh Chloinne Lir' in *Eriú* 50 (1999), pp 1-40. In this narrative, probably written down in the Franciscan monastery of

The lake is also a significant wintering site for migratory species such as the Whooper Swan as well as different species of duck including Widgeon, Tufted Duck and Golden Eye. The lough is also a breeding ground for resident species such as Mute Swan, the Great Crested Grebe, Coote, Moorhen, Mallard, Teal and Heron. Other birds found by the lakeshore and the woodlands on the surrounding hills, are the Barn Owl, Sparrow Hawk, Kestrel and the Kingfisher.

Lough Derravarragh used to be a major brown trout fishing lake from the 1950s to the 1970s, particularly renowned for its mayfly fishing from August to September. In recent years, brown trout stocks have declined due to the River Inny drainage scheme, the increasing eutrophication of its water from local farming activities and the introduction of roach stocks. Instead, the lough is today regarded as an exceptionally good pike fishing lake, holding stocks of big pike up to specimen weight. Pike angling has been the main tourist attraction to the lake over the past ten years. The lake also holds a good stock of coarse fish that include roach, bream, bream hybrids and tench.

Lough Derravarragh: its shoreline, water-depths and weather conditions

Lough Derravarragh is a water-body with strikingly different ranges of water-depths along its length. These are mostly governed by the geological and geomorphological topography of the landscape. The northern part of the lough is typically broad and shallow. Around this shoreline, from Donore, around to Clonava, Derrya, Coolure and Kiltoom, it is rarely deeper than 1.5m, although in the very middle of the broader part of the lake, there is a 'hole' up to 6m in depth. Moving down the lake, towards the southwest, the lakebed begins to deepen as the slopes of the surrounding land get steeper. From about Ballinphort (on the west shore) and Faughalstown (on the east side), there is a narrow, steep-sided trough dropping to depths of 15m. From narrow level terraces just off the shore, the lakebed drops steeply down into dark water. At the deepest end of the

Multyfarnham at the northwest end of Lough Derravarragh, the king's children are turned into swans by their jealous step-mother, Aoife. They are fated to spend three hundred years as swans on the lake (Loch Dairbhreach), where they converse during the day with the broken-hearted King and his followers (of the Bodbh Dearg and the Tuatha Dé Danann) who establish an encampment (a *longphort*) on the shore, while they entertain them with beautiful singing during the night. The sons of Milesius (i.e. the people of Ireland) also gather in encampments on the lakeshore to listen to the songs. Afterwards the children spend hundreds of years at other places, before finally encountering and being freed from their curse by the Christian saint, St. Mochaomhóg. It is possible that the accounts of the encampments were inspired by the impressive early medieval ringforts at Coolure Demesne and late medieval timber castle at Faughalstown. Intriguingly, there is also an early medieval ringfort at the north of the lake, in Lispopple townland (i.e. 'fort of the gathering', or 'fort of the pavilion') indicating public assemblies and it is also likely that the ringforts and crannogs at Coolure Demesne were venues for public gatherings in the ninth and tenth centuries AD. Was there memory of them in the late Middle Ages?

lake, beside the steep craggy slopes of Knockeyon, Knockcross and Knockbrody, the lake plumbs unusual depths of 25-30m.

In broad terms, in early prehistory, the lake must have been lower than it is today, with fen peats bordering on its shoreline.²⁷ Thereafter, it is possible the lake levels rose slightly, perhaps being at their height in later prehistory (eroding an upper scarp on the shoreline). However, it seems likely that early medieval water levels were not significantly different than today's. The location of wooden palisades and spreads of *in-situ* animal bone around the edges of a known early medieval crannog at Coolure must mean that it was constructed at, or near, contemporary lake levels. On the other hand, seasonal changes and higher winter levels may have submerged some of these crannogs, as happens today in winter. The water levels in Lough Derravarragh have been radically altered at least twice in recent centuries. There may have been a first drainage programme around 1860. In the late 1960s, the major drainage project was carried out on the River Inny. The river was dredged, deepened and canalised, both before and after its inflow and outlet from the northern part of the lake. This led to a drop of water levels of about 1-2 metres.

Working on and beside the lake while doing crannog surveys gives a strong sense of the impact of the weather. In the summer, mornings can be bright and sunny, giving way quickly in the afternoon to dark, overhanging clouds. Rain clouds can be seen sweeping across the water for minutes before they break. In winter, the lake is dark, stormy and brooding, with excessively cold water. In both summer and winter, the prevailing winds from the southwest quickly raise a steep, choppy swell. In strong southeasterly winds, the lake is dangerous for boats, with a strong wave pattern rolling up the entire length of the lake. In these conditions, it is better to keep one's boat into the shelter of the southwest shoreline. Stormy weather combined with the shallowing water at the northwest end of the lake also leads to large waves crashing down upon the shoreline (and the crannogs in the water). It is clear that the lake's crannogs were occasionally built to resist this weather, with stone kerbs and wooden palisades facing out into the water, while they also tend to be in sheltered locations. In particular, the crannogs at Coolure, Donore are in sheltered bays, while the crannogs at Monintown and Ballynakill hug the sheltering southwest shore. In contrast, the Faughalstown crannog on the east shore would have been virtually uninhabitable in the worst storms.

²⁷ Mesolithic camp sites at Clonava were only discovered when the lake was drained in the 1960s, so

Prehistoric and medieval settlement on Lough Derravarragh

The earliest evidence for human settlement on Lough Derravarragh dates to the Late Mesolithic (c.4300 BC), when hunter-gatherers occupied various parts of the northwest and west shoreline, as indicated by the discovery of chert Bann flakes at Clonava, Clonkeen, Donore, Lacken and Ballinphort. The Clonava shoreline was certainly of some significance in the Late Mesolithic. In the fifth millennium BC, it would have been an island of glacial till (some 2km in total length and 850m wide), set in a waterlogged mosaic of lake, fen and marshy wetlands with the River Inny flowing through it. After the lake's drainage in 1969, Frank Mitchell identified lithic scatters along the Clonava shoreline, initially as stray finds on the exposed foreshore. He also excavated one site (Clonava Site 1) which was located to the north of Clonava island on the south bank of the River Inny.²⁸ This was a small area of undisturbed material on a knoll of fen peat where a scatter of charcoal and struck chert could be traced in the fen peat and raised bog section by the riverbank. His excavations were small-scale (4 m²), largely oriented at recovering environmental samples. Fen peat separated a lower, middle and top layer of chert waste. The basal layer was the main deposit. Two scatters of debitage were also found on the top and sides of the peat knoll. The main occupation layer, the lowest, was composed of charcoal, wood, hazelnuts, chert implements and debitage and angular fragments of burnt sandstone. Charcoal provided a calibrated radiocarbon date of 3410 ± 110 bc (5360 ± 110 BP; I-4234). At the centre of this layer was a thicker mass of debitage, suggesting that there was some chert knapping. Three implements were recovered during the excavations, along with 100 pieces of chert debitage. Woodman also re-inspected the site and recovered a polished stone axe, a pointed pick and a distally trimmed Bann flake from the foreshore.²⁹ Cooney recovered struck chert flakes at Clonkeen, Co. Westmeath, just to the south-west of Clonava, further downstream on the course of the River Inny.³⁰

Mitchell attempted through macrofossil studies to reconstruct the original environmental conditions and activities on the site. Plants identified included water sedge, hazelnuts, yellow water lily, buttercup, marsh woundwort and guelder rose. Charred hazelnuts and seeds of Yellow Water lily (*Nuphar luteum*) were also found. The seeds

they must have originally have been beside a lower lake.

²⁸ G.F. Mitchell, 'Some ultimate Larnian sites at Lake Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath' *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 102, (1972), pp 160-73.

²⁹ Peter Woodman, *The Mesolithic in Ireland: hunter-gatherers in an insular environment*. British Archaeological Reports, International Series 58 (Oxford, 1978), p. 321.

³⁰ Gabriel Cooney, 'North Leinster in the earlier prehistoric period'. Unpublished Ph.D. thesis. Dept. of Archaeology (N.U.I, University College, Dublin, 1987), pp 62-4.

and rhizomes of this plant are both edible. The seeds were randomly distributed through the samples suggesting that they had not naturally fallen from the flower head. Mitchell interpreted this as being evidence for food preparation.³¹ He suggested that the site was located in a fen beside the lake, which had been dissected by numerous channels as the River Inny entered Lough Derravarragh. He also suggested that the lithics were the result of wildfowling or fishers procuring and preparing chert implements while waiting by the lakeshore. The Clonava site is one of the several in the north midlands.³² It could be interpreted as the autumnal campsite of a hunter-gatherer band moving along the River Inny drainage system, inhabiting the island of Clonava for a period of time. While the wetland resources of the lake were undoubtedly attractive, and the outcrops of chert on the lakeshore and more particularly on top of Knockeyon, would have been valued, there are other potential explanations. It is possible that the lake was a seasonal gathering place for hunter-gatherers in the north midlands, meeting up to exchange stories, news, sexual partners, all aimed at providing a diversely spread community with some sense of identity.

Although there is no evidence for Neolithic settlement around Lough Derravarragh, there is a sense that the Late Bronze Age sees a re-engagement with the lake by local communities. There is also an impressive hill-top enclosure, a possible ring-ditch and a standing stone off to the east of the lake at Milltown and these could probably be regarded as Bronze Age in date.³³ Closer to the lake, but still back from its edge at Kiltoom, on the north shoreline, there is a Middle to Late Bronze Age fulacht fiadh³⁴ and ring-barrow³⁵ adjacent to a boggy area. There are also Late Bronze Age finds from Kiltoom. A Late Bronze Age sword and socketed axe was found in a raised bog in Kiltoom, about 1km from the lakeshore. There are also at least two Late Bronze Age swords from the lakeshore itself, both apparently found on the Kiltoom shoreline (adjacent to the Kiltoom 10 and Kiltoom 4/5 crannogs). A Late Bronze Age spearhead was also found in Faughalstown, on the east shore of the lake. It is possible that this Late Bronze Age activity relates to some settlement along the shoreline. In fact, the small, low-cairn crannogs at Kiltoom (see Appendix 2) could well be Bronze Age in origins, although their size, morphology and proximity to an early medieval church also suggests an early medieval date. It is also possible that there was Bronze Age ritual activity along

³¹ Mitchell, 'Some ultimate Larnian sites at Lake Derravarragh', p. 165.

³² For the most recent summary of Late Mesolithic lakeshore settlement in the north midlands, see O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 43-59.

³³ A.S.I. Files, Westmeath RMP WM 7:51, Milltown, WM 7:50, Milltown.

³⁴ A.S.I. Files Westmeath RMP WM 7:7, Kiltoom.

³⁵ A.S.I. Files, Westmeath RMP WM 7:6, Kiltoom.

this part of the shoreline unrelated to settlement, with prestigious weaponry being cast into the lake's waters. Interestingly, there is also some limited evidence for Iron Age activity on Lough Derravarragh. An Iron Age dugout boat was exposed and excavated on the western shore at Ballinphort in 1985.³⁶ This oak boat was 8.47m in length, with a curved bow, a straight-ended stern, ash and willow braces, willow side tenons and a willow stern board. A single object, a 'wooden spear' lay inside the boat. This boat has been radiocarbon dated to the Iron Age at 172-51 BC (2100 ± 20 BP, GrN 20551).³⁷ There are also three further, but undated dugout boats found at the north end of Lough Derravarragh, all on the Derrya shoreline. These boats are all of oak, variously with perforations, internal ridges, mast holes and perforations and nail lines. It is likely that all are early medieval or late medieval in date. Derrya 1 was 4.35m in length, with iron nails along its length,³⁸ Derrya 2 was 2.75m in length with a central masthole,³⁹ while Derrya 4 was poorly preserved and was featureless, apart from a crack that was stitched together with nails.⁴⁰

The richest archaeological evidence for settlement along Lough Derravarragh dates to the early middle ages (Fig. 5.6). There are several early medieval ringforts on the shoreline itself, particularly at Coolure Demesne at the north end of the lake and also along the top of the ridge running parallel to the lake to the east (in Faughalstown and Rinnstown). There is also a dense concentration of early medieval ringforts to the southwest of the lake, with as many as 15 ringforts on higher ground in Tober, Ballynakill and Ballinphort. Indeed, the linear distribution of these ringforts probably indicates that a road or pathway originally led towards the mid-point of the lake. It may be significant however that these ringforts tend to be situated back from the lake itself, perhaps indicating that the crannogs served as principal residences for people inhabiting the lakeshore between the sixth and the tenth century.

There are at least 18 crannogs on the lake, at least two of which have produced early medieval artefacts (i.e. Coolure Demesne 1, Ballynakill 1). There are also significant early medieval church sites, graveyards, holy wells, at Lacken on the west shore and particularly on the east shore, at Kiltoom, Faughalstown and possibly on the steep slopes of Knockeyon Hill. The Knockeyon site is a small, rectangular stone building against the

³⁶ A.S.I. Files, Westmeath RMP WM 7:47, Ballinphort.

³⁷ Jan Lanting and Anna Brindley, 'Irish logboats and their European context' in *J. Ir. Archaeol*, 7 (1996), pp 85-95, at p. 89.

³⁸ N.M.I. Top. Files, Derrya townland, Co. Westmeath: 1968:224.

³⁹ N.M.I. Top. Files, Derry townland, Co. Westmeath: 1968:225.

⁴⁰ N.M.I. Top. Files, Derrya townland, Co. Westmeath: 1968:197-8.

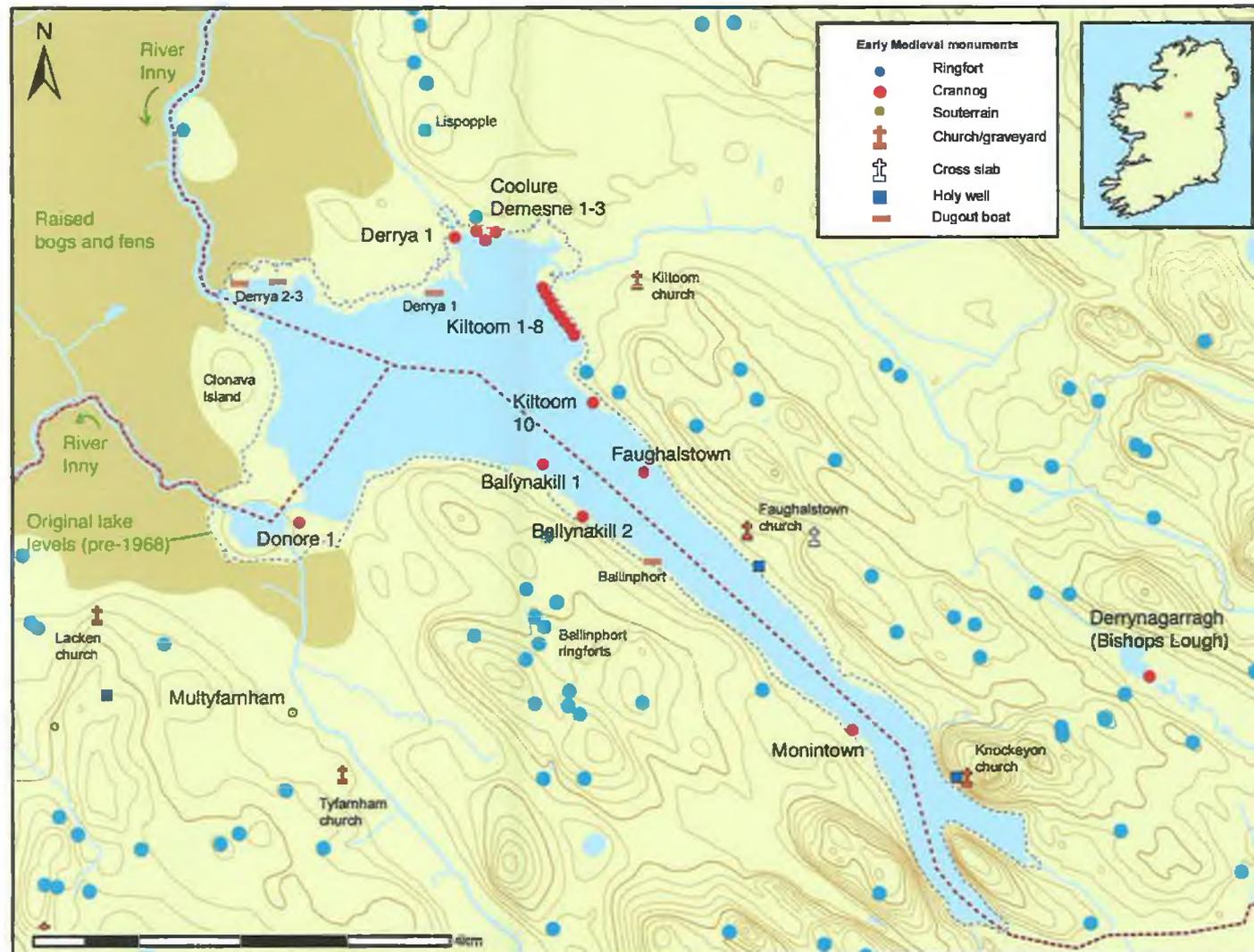


Fig. 5.6: Distribution map of early medieval monuments (ringforts, crannogs, churches and holy wells) around Lough Derravarragh. The lough's crannogs are typically found at the shallow, northwest end of the lake, adjacent to good agricultural land, avoiding raised bogs and fens along the River Inny and the steep slopes of Knockeyon, Knockbrody and Knockcross at the opposite, deep end of the lake

cliffs, buried deep in the oakwoods, and sits adjacent to a holy well. It was ruinous by the seventeenth century and may be in origins an early medieval hermitage or church.⁴¹

In the late Middle Ages, there is also archaeological evidence for a significant Anglo-Norman timber castle on the lakeshore at Faughalstown. This site is locally known and depicted on maps as 'Mortimer's Castle'.⁴² It is a large rectangular, earthen enclosure (52m NE-SW, by 125m NW-SE) on a steep slope overlooking the lake. It has the remains of a two-storey, mortared stone tower or castle at the northwest corner of the site.⁴³ There is also some evidence for late medieval activity at Faughalstown graveyard to the east, where there are fonts and late medieval cross shafts.⁴⁴ Multyfarnham was probably also of some significance in the twelfth and thirteenth century, as witnessed by its motte.⁴⁵ There is also a late medieval towerhouse at Williamstown, to the northeast of the lake.⁴⁶

In the post-medieval period (i.e. the seventeenth and eighteenth century), there is a sense of the local landscape gradually being appropriated within the estates of local landlords, with large houses being constructed at Coolure Demesne, Donore and Crookedwood. In particular, most of the north shore of the lake was within the estate of the Pakenhams, who were based at Tullynally Castle off the road to Castlepollard. There is also a possible post-medieval or nineteenth century clachan at Faughalstown, where there is a small cluster of houses and farm-buildings around the medieval church and graveyard and holy well at Faughalstown. Otherwise, local settlement patterns indicate a gradual turning away from the lake, with an increased focus on the villages and roads at Castlepollard, Multyfarnham and Crookedwood. Today, Lough Derravarragh is largely only used for tourism (with a large caravan park at Donore) and angling, as with much of the north midlands lakes.

⁴¹ Piers, *A chorographical description of the county of West-Meath*, pp 12-13, provides a seventeenth-century description of this as a ruined 'ancient chapel dedicated to a saint, called Eyen or Keyon', with a holy well beside that was the focus of local pilgrimage, to be followed by 'lewd and obscene dancing, and in excess of drinking'.

⁴² Piers, *A chorographical description of the county of West-Meath*, pp 67-8 states that 'Fahatty (Mortimer's *Latium*) ny its runis, for it is now little else, speaks itself to have been the residence of a prince'; Martin Pulbrook, 'The grandeur of Mortimer's Castle' in *The Westmeath Examiner* 26th August (2000), p. 10, reckons that it was fortress of Roger Mortimer who took the lordship of Meath in 1317.

⁴³ A.S.I. Files, Westmeath RMP WM 7:44 ; Faughalstown.

⁴⁴ A.S.I. Files, Westmeath RMP WM 7:45 ; Faughalstown.

⁴⁵ A.S.I. Files, Westmeath RMP WM 7:72, Ballindurrow.

Early medieval politics and peoples in Westmeath

Introduction

In the early medieval period, Westmeath was within a geographical region and political territory known as the kingdom of Mide.⁴⁷ Mide included (between the seventh and the ninth centuries) the region covered by Co. Westmeath, northwest Offaly (the baronies of Garrycastle and Kilcoursey) and eastern parts of Longford.⁴⁸ Through most of the early Middle Ages, Mide was controlled by the Clann Cholmáin (Uí Máelsechlainn) dynasty of the southern Uí Néill (Fig. 5.7).⁴⁹ In the eighth and ninth century, Mide was bordered to its east by the Uí Néill kingdom of Brega, which lay beyond the River Boyne and Blackwater. To the north lay the Uí Néill kingdoms of Tethbae, within the territories of the Cenél Coirpri (Tethbae Thúaiscirt) and the Cenél Maini (Tethbae Deiscirt) both lying on the far of the River Inny and its boglands. To the west of Mide, and across the River Shannon (and Lough Ree) lay the territories of the Uí Máine in Connacht. Mide also extended down through the midland corridor into the territories of the Cenél Fiachach and the Delbna Bethra, within the modern Offaly baronies of Garrycastle and Ballycowan. To the south lay the provinces and kingdoms of the Laigin and of Munster.

Politics and peoples in the fifth to sixth centuries AD

The political and territorial organisation of this midlands region is unclear in the fifth to sixth centuries. It is probable that, like elsewhere in Ireland, there was a mix of loose tribal federations and growing new dynasties beginning to exert control. In the late fifth century, there may have been a large Uí Maine kingdom straddling the River Shannon, but this was ultimately broken up by the emerging dynastic families of the Uí Néill and pushed across into Connacht (while leaving small population groups of Maine on the

⁴⁶ A.S.I Files, Westmeath RMP WM 7:2, Williamstown.

⁴⁷ Mide (literally 'middle area') was originally a placename referring to a district surrounding the hill of Uisneach, in Co. Westmeath, being a geographical term applied to a physical district, without any political, tribal or dynastic connotations. With the rise of the Clann Cholmáin dynasty of the southern Uí Néill in the seventh century, the term Mide became synonymous with the territorial extent of that dynasty, and was linked to their political fortunes. By the eleventh century, when the political power of the Clann Cholmáin was extended over Brega to the east, Mide consequently became a larger political entity. Eventually, the Anglo-Norman Lordship of Meath took the territory of Mide at its widest extent, now represented by the diocese of Meath. In my use of 'Mide', I generally refer (unless otherwise stated) to the seventh and eighth century kingdom encompassing the modern county of Westmeath, for bibliographical references for the above summary, see the following footnotes.

⁴⁸ Walsh, *The placenames of Westmeath*, ix-xxxv.

⁴⁹ For general introductions to political territories in early medieval Mide, see Paul Walsh, 'Meath in the Book of Rights' in Eóin Ó Riain (ed.), *Féilsgribhinn Eóin Mhic Néill* (Dublin, 1940), pp 508-21; for an account of the Uí Máel sechnaill kings of Mide, see Paul Walsh, 'The Ua Maelechlainn kings of Meath' in *I.E.R.* (series 5) 58 (1941), pp 165-83.

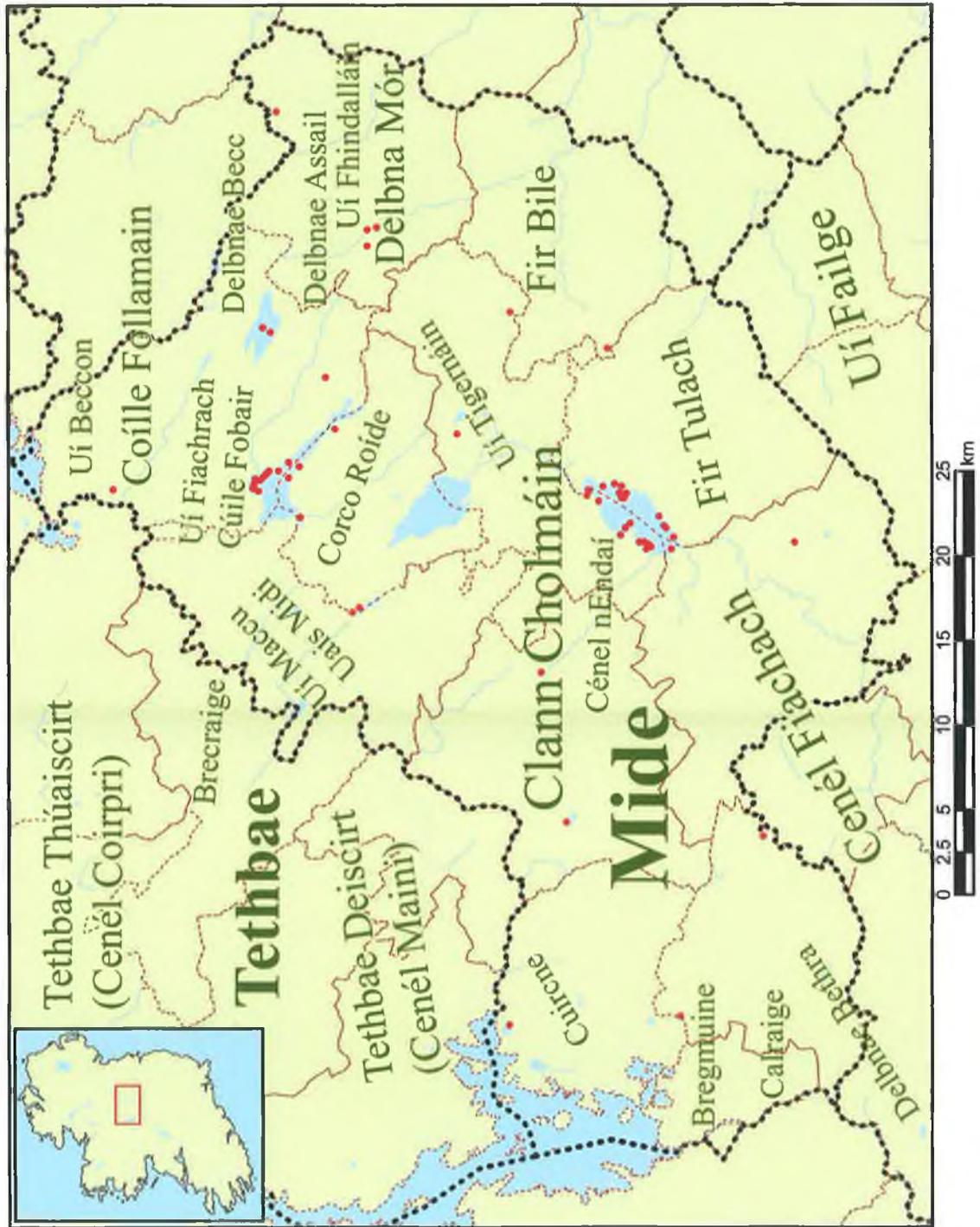


Fig. 5.7. Early medieval dynasties and population groups in Westmeath, c. AD 800. Between the seventh and the eleventh century, this region was situated within the early medieval kingdom of Mide, which was largely controlled by the southern Uí Néill dynasty, the Clann Cholmáin.

Longford/Westmeath border).⁵⁰ In the early sixth century, the Cenél Fiachach (an Uí Néill group who were later to be eclipsed by the Clann Cholmáin) wrested control of the plain of Mide from the kingdom of Leinster, providing them with control of the strategic midland corridor down into Munster and the major east-west routeways across the island.⁵¹ Other significant sixth-century population groups, who had possibly been originally under the overlordship of the Laigin (Leinster), mentioned in the annals include the Fir Bile, Fir Tulach and Delbna, all of whom would be of local importance later in the period.⁵²

Towards the end of the sixth century, the Uí Néill polity was beginning to be established. The Uí Néill were essentially an agglomeration of dynasties, linked by common claimed ancestry, blood ties and expedient strategic links with older dynasties whose territories had fragmented.⁵³ The most significant Uí Néill population groups in the midlands were to be the Clann Cholmáin (who claimed descent from Colmán Már, the son of Diarmait mac Cerbaill), the Síl nÁedo Sláine of Brega (reputedly descended from Aéd Sláine, also son of Diarmait mac Cerbaill), and the Coille Follamain (descended from Colmán Becc, reputedly a third son but probably a fictional figure).⁵⁴ The Coille Follamain were later to be squeezed out of significant power, after the death of Follaman (obit AD 766) who was the last to attain the kingship of Mide. In the seventh century, internecine warfare was frequent between both older and newer dynasties in the region, and the annals also refer to various battles between the Clann Cholmáin and the Síl nÁedo Sláine, as the former attempted to establish hegemony over the midlands. Thence, in AD 602, there was a battle on the shores of Loch Semdidi (Lough Sewdy, north of Ballymore, Co. Westmeath), when Aéd Sláine himself and Aed Rón king of Uí Failge of Laigin (Leinster) were killed by Conall son of Suibne of Clann Cholmáin, in a place known as 'Faethgi meic Meccnaen' (the *faithche* being the royal or mensal lands adjacent to a *villa regis*, thus suggesting that there was a royal site on the lake, perhaps on the large Sally Island).⁵⁵ The struggle between the two dynasties also led to a battle in AD 634 at

⁵⁰ Ó Cróinín, *Early medieval Ireland, 400-1200*, p. 61.

⁵¹ *Ann. Tig.* 516; *A.F.M.* 507.2, 'The battle of Druim Deargaighe was gained against Foilghe Berraidhe, by Fiacha, son of Niall. From that time forward the land extending from Cluain In Dibhair to Uisneach belongs to the Cinel Fiachach'; A.P. Smyth, 'The Húi Néill and the Leinstermen in the Annals of Ulster, 431-516 AD' in *Études Celtiques* 14 (1974-5), pp 121-43, at pp 137-42; F.J. Byrne *Irish kings and high-kings* (London, 1973), p. 93; Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, p. 88.

⁵² Gearóid Mac Niocaill, *Ireland before the Vikings* (Dublin, 1972), pp 35, 40.

⁵³ F.J. Byrne, *The rise of the Uí Néill and the high-kingship of Ireland* (Dublin, 1969); Byrne *Irish kings and high-kings*; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 441-68.

⁵⁴ Mc Shamhráin 'Nebulae discutiuntur? The emergence of Clann Cholmáin, sixth-eighth centuries', pp 83-97.

⁵⁵ *A.U.* 604.2, *A.U.* 604.3; Edel Bhreathnach, 'A Midhe is maith da bhámar: thoughts on medieval

Loch Treitni (probably Lough Drin, northeast of Mullingar) opposite Fremainn (Frewin Hill, overlooking Lough Owel) and 'the killing of two sons of Aed Sláine by Conall son of Suibne (of Clann Cholmáin).⁵⁶

Politics and peoples in the eighth to ninth centuries AD

By the mid-seventh century (i.e. after c. AD 728), the Clann Cholmáin had risen to power and had established their hegemony over the midlands, and as the SílnÁedo Sláine descended into internal feuding, power within the southern Uí Néill dynasty shifted westwards from the kingdom of Brega into Mide. Between AD 728 and the death of Maelsechnaill II in 1022, the kingship of the southern Uí Néill was always filled by the Clann Cholmáin (apart from a brief period between 944 and 956). Through the eighth and ninth century, the Uí Néill kingship of Tara itself alternated between the Cenél nÉogain (of Ailech and the northern Uí Néill) and the Clann Cholmáin, with the latter producing such kings as Domnall mac Murchada (obit AD 763),⁵⁷ Donnchad mac Domnaill (obit AD 797)⁵⁸ and Conchobar mac Donnchada (obit AD 833).⁵⁹ However, it was the Clann Cholmáin king of Mide and Tara, Máel Sechnaill mac Máele Ruanaid (often known as Máel Sechnaill I, obit AD 862) described as *rí érenn uile* (king of all Ireland) upon his death in the annals, who was the first to make a reality of the Uí Néill's claim of the kingship of Ireland.⁶⁰

Máel Sechnaill I was to achieve notable victories against the Vikings at the height of their raids in the midlands in the mid-ninth century.⁶¹ In AD 845, he drowned a Viking leader Turgeis (who commanded a Viking fleet based on Lough Ree that was raiding into Mide and Connacht) in Lough Owel.⁶² It is likely that this action was carried out near one of his own seats of power (e.g. perhaps at the Clann Cholmáin ringfort at Ruba Chonaill, near Mullingar). It is also possible that Lough Lene (where there are still islands locally known as 'Turgesius Islands', all overlooked by a raised ringfort named

Mide'.

⁵⁶ *A.U.* 634.1; Paul Walsh, 'Mullinoran and other placenames' in Paul Walsh, *Irish leaders and learning through the ages* (Dublin, 2003), pp 303-9, at p. 308.

⁵⁷ *A.U.* 763.1

⁵⁸ *A.U.* 797.1

⁵⁹ *A.U.* 833.1

⁶⁰ *A.U.* 862.5; Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 257; although others have suggested that this was part of a steady consolidation of Uí Néill power before the arrival of the Vikings, e.g. see Edel Bhreathnach, *Tara: A select bibliography* (Dublin, 1995), pp 13-14.

⁶¹ *A.U.* 848.4

⁶² *A.U.* 845.3, 'There was an encampment of the foreigners, i.e. under Turgeis, on Loch Ri and they plundered Connacht and Mide'; *A.U.* 845.8 'Tuirgeis was taken prisoner by Mael Sechnaill and afterwards drowned in Loch Uair' (probably Lough Owel).

'Turgesius Fort') was also a centre of Clann Cholmáin power in the ninth century.⁶³ A crannog at Castle Island, Lough Lene has certainly produced a contemporary, mid-ninth century date (see Appendix 2). However, although Mael Sechail had several residences throughout Mide, it is likely that his main seat of power was on the shores of Lough Ennell, at the ringfort of Dún na Sciath and the crannog of Cróinis (see Appendix 2). Significantly, a mid-ninth century date was obtained from the outer palisade of the crannog of Cróinis, suggesting its fortification and use at this time. That Máel Sechnaill was extending Clann Cholmáin influences into Laigin and Munster is also indicated by the fact that he plundered Dublin in AD 849⁶⁴ and negotiated a royal assembly (*rigdal*) at Rahugh (Ráith Áeda maic Bricc) on the borderlands of Mide, Laigin and Munster in AD 859.⁶⁵

If the Clann Cholmáin was the dominant midland dynasty in the eighth and ninth century, there is also good evidence for other contemporary population groups throughout Mide (and Tethba). These included the descendants of earlier, original tribal groups as well as vassal peoples of the Uí Néill. The most significant overlords of minor Uí Néill sub-kingdoms were the Cenél Fiachach and the Coille Follamain (in Mide) and the Cairpre and Máine (in Tethba). To the north of Mide were the Cairpre in the kingdom of Tethba, around Granard, occupying the territory from Lough Sheelin to north of the River Inny.⁶⁶ The territory of the Máine also lay within Tethba and stretched southwards across the River Inny and eastwards to the shore of Lough Ree. They claimed descent from the Uí Néill, but it is thought that they may have been the remains of the original Máine overkingdom that preceded the Uí Néill expansion.⁶⁷

In the northeast of Mide were the Coille Follamain (originally Clann Cholmáin Bicc, claiming descendancy from the Uí Néill ancestor, Colmán Becc), who occupied the borderlands between Mide and Brega, in the modern barony of Fore (around Killallon), northeast of Lough Derravarragh and Lough Lene. They are mentioned in the annals between the sixth and the seventh centuries, but were thereafter excluded from the kingship of Tara by the Clann Cholmáin. In the south were the Cenél Fiachach, who originally occupied the territories from Uisneach south into Offaly. Their ancestor Fiachu macNeill was said to have been responsible for winning Mide from Laigin in the

⁶³ A.P. Smyth, 'Húi Failgi relations with the Húi Néill in the century after the loss of the plain of Mide' in *Études Celtiques* 14 (1974-5), pp 503-23, at p. 515.

⁶⁴ *Chron. Scot.* 849.

⁶⁵ *A.U.* 859.3

⁶⁶ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, p. 21

⁶⁷ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 91; Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, p. 21.

sixth century.⁶⁸ However, the rise of the Clann Cholmáin was to see them being pushed southwards, into the modern baronies of Moycashel (Westmeath), Kilcoursey and Garrycastle (Offaly).⁶⁹ A related sub-group were the Cenél nÉndai, whose lands formerly stretched from Uisnech to Lough Ennell.⁷⁰

In the eighth and ninth century, there was also a bewildering range of other small population groups living within and between the Uí Néill lands in Mide (a fact that contrasts with the picture in other regions), variously being vassals and subject tribes of 'obscure and disparate origins'.⁷¹ To the west were the Cuircne, (within the modern barony of Kilkenny West), a vassal kingdom on the east shores of Lough Ree, mentioned in the annals between the ninth and the twelfth century.⁷² To the south of them were the Bregmuine (whose name is preserved within that of the modern barony of Brawny), and to the south again, the Calraige.⁷³ Furthest to the southwest were the Delbna Bethra, amongst the boglands, islands and eskers east of the River Shannon, near the monastery and churches of Clonmacnoise in northwest Offaly. In the southeast of the kingdom of Mide were the Fir Tulach ('men of the hillocks'), descendants of an earlier population group, which had been demoted by the Clann Cholmáin. The Fir Tulach territory (giving its name to the modern barony of Fartullagh) lay on the east shore of Lough Ennell, and was enclosed on the other sides by raised bogs. Their stronghold or royal seat was a place known as Dún na Cairrge, probably an island cashel situated on the east side of Lough Ennell (see Appendix 2). Their most significant churches were at Lann and Clonfad, at the north and south ends of the kingdom.⁷⁴ Further to the east of them were the Fir Bile ('people of the sacred tree'), whose petty kingdom was probably co-extensive with the modern barony of Farbill (as well as the large parish of Killucan).⁷⁵ To the northeast of these were the Delbna Mór (whose kingdom's name survives as the barony of Delvin).⁷⁶

In the northeast, were the Corco Roíde (i.e. whose kingdom was probably co-extensive with the modern barony of Corkaree), a population group of possible Leinster origins

⁶⁸ *A.F.M.* 507.2; Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 93; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 451-8

⁶⁹ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, pp 28, 445-6, 452-3, 554-5.

⁷⁰ Walsh, *Westmeath*, pp xxx.

⁷¹ Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 69.

⁷² *A.U.* 822.10, for example, referring to the ninth-century battle when 'The Uí Garbáin, the Cuircne and the Felle routed the Delbna'; Walsh, *Westmeath*, pp xvi-xvii.

⁷³ Walsh, *Westmeath*, pp xxxii-xxxiii

⁷⁴ Walsh, *Westmeath*, xxix; Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, p. 85.

⁷⁵ Walsh, *Westmeath*, p. xxviii.

⁷⁶ Walsh, *Westmeath*, p xxvii.

that occupied the densely settled lands bordered by Lough Derravarragh and the River Inny to the north and Lough Owel to the west.⁷⁷ Along their southern borders were the Uí Thígernáin, in the vicinity of Loch Drin, a people who are frequently mentioned in the saint's *Life* of Colmáin maic Lúachain.⁷⁸ Walsh suggests that this tribe was settled west of Ruba Chonaill, in the barony of Magheraderman and along the western shore of Lough Ennell (the Uí Gussáin are also mentioned as inhabiting its west shore, near Cróinis).⁷⁹ To the northwest of the Corco Roíde, but probably still south of the River Inny and between Lough Iron and Lough Derravarragh, were the Uí Maccu Uais Midi. Charles-Edwards suggests that their kingdom is reflected in the modern barony of Moygoish.⁸⁰ It has been suggested that the Uí Maccu Uais Midi were a tribe of the Airgialla who had been incorporated into the Uí Néill. An early medieval church at Lacken on the northwest shore of Lough Derravarragh probably lay within their territory, as did Kilbixy.⁸¹ To the north lay the territory of Breacraighe, or Magh Breacraighe, across the River Inny, partly within the barony of Moygoish.⁸²

The territories of the Uí Fiachrach (or Tír Fiachrach), the Gregraiage and the Uí Beccon lay in the northeast of Mide, within the barony of Fore.⁸³ The Uí Fiachrach are mentioned in the twelfth-century *Lebor na Cert* ('Book of Rights') and the genealogies as the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair (i.e. 'the Uí Fiachrach of Coolure').⁸⁴ They were probably descended from, or related, to a population group known as the Cenél Lóeghaire who were by then settled in Brega, around Trim, Co. Meath but who retained links with a locality that they had dominated in the seventh century. Walsh suggests that the territory of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair was located on the northern shore of Lough Derravarragh, in the modern townland of Coolure Demesne.⁸⁵ If this is so, then it is likely that their royal residences were the impressive crannog and ringfort at Coolure Demesne, on the north shores of the lough (see Appendix 2). There is also an early

⁷⁷ Mac Shamhráin, *Church and polity in pre-Norman Ireland: the case of Glendalough*, pp 52-3; Walsh, *Westmeath*, xxv-vi, xxx.

⁷⁸ Walsh, *Westmeath*, p. xxiii; Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, pl. xiii.

⁷⁹ Walsh, 'topography', p. 573, 576.

⁸⁰ Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 574, note 180.

⁸¹ Walsh, *Westmeath*, p. xxiv, p. 296; Byrne, *The rise of the Uí Néill*, p. 13; Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 117; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 74, note 180. A ninth-century battle indicates the internecine warfare in the locality, i.e. *A.U.* 812.10, 'A slaughter of the Corcu Roídi of Mide by the Uí Moccu Uais'.

⁸² Walsh, *Westmeath*, p. 296, 319; A seventh-century battle with the Cairpre of Tethba may have destroyed whatever political power they held; i.e. *A.U.* 752.14, 'Destruction of the Breacraighe by the Cenél Cairpri, in Tulach Finnin'.

⁸³ Walsh, *Westmeath*, p. xxviii.

⁸⁴ Paul Walsh, 'Meath in the Book of Rights', at p. 15.

⁸⁵ Paul Walsh, 'A fragment used by Keating' in *Archivium Hibernicum* 1 (1912), pp 1-9, at p. 8 note 39; Walsh, *Westmeath*, p. 373-4.

medieval church and graveyard at Kiltoom nearby, while a ringfort on the hill within the townland of Lispopple (*Lios an phobail*, 'fort of the gathering' or 'fort of the pavilion') suggests periodic public fairs or markets.

Clann Cholmáin and the Uí Máelsechnaill kings in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD

In the course of the tenth century, the Clann Cholmáin kings imposed their power eastwards towards Hiberno-Norse Dublin and the Síl nÁedo Sláine territories of Brega, beginning with the reign of Flann Sinna mac Maélsechnaill (obit 916) who held the kingship of the Uí Néill and Tara. However, Mide was itself also subject to raids and expeditions from rival kingdoms. Interestingly, many of these raids were aimed at the lakes, with their crannogs on Lough Ennell and elsewhere. Thence, in AD 961, Domnaill Uí Néill, king of Cenél nÉogain (of the northern Uí Néill, obit AD 980) transported boats down into Mide to attack the crannogs of Lough Ennell, as part of his campaign to weaken the Uí Máelsechlainn hold on the kingship of Tara and the midlands.⁸⁶ In AD 985, the Connachta also carried a raid across Mide as far as Lough Ennell, in retaliation for an earlier raid by Máel Sechnaill maic Domnaill.⁸⁷ There were also raids on Lough Ennell in AD 989 by a force of the Norse and the Leinstermen⁸⁸ and in AD 991 by Brian Boraimhe of the Dál gCais of Munster.⁸⁹

By the end of the tenth century, the Clann Cholmáin king, Maél Sechnaill maic Domnaill (often known as Maél Sechnaill II, obit AD 1022) had crushed the Síl nÁedo Sláine of Brega and had extended the name of the kingdom of Mide to cover the whole of the north midlands, from the Shannon to the Irish Sea.⁹⁰ He raided and captured Hiberno-Norse Dublin in AD 980, 989 and 993. Interestingly, on at least one of these occasions he exacted a significant political tribute from the town's inhabitants. The *Annals of Tigernach* claimed that when Máel Sechnaill captured Dublin in AD 989, 'they gave him what he wished for as long as he should be king, and an ounce of gold from

⁸⁶ A.U. 961.7; *Ní nemh-ghnath do dhénamh lasin righ Domhnall, mac Muirchertaigh .i. longa do breith dar Dabhall, tar Sliabh Fuait co Loch n-Aindind, co ro h-oircedh oiléna an locha lais.* ('An unusual thing was done by the King Domhnall, son of Muircheartach; namely he brought fleets over Dabhall, and across Sliabh Fuaid, to Loch Ainninn, so that the islands of the lakes were plundered by him').

⁸⁷ A.U. 984.5; *Maoil Sechlainn, mac Domhnaill, do indredh Connacht, & do thoghail a n-innsedh, & do mharbhadh a t-toiseach, 7 do-radadh Magh n-Aoi h-i luaithredh lais. Creach fo a la mhodh lá Connachtaibh co Loch n-Aindind, co ro.* ('Maelseachlainn, son of Domhnall, plundered Connaught, destroyed its islands, and killed its chieftains, and reduced Magh-Aei to ashes. A depredation was committed by the Connaughtmen, in retaliation, as far as Loch-Ainninn').

⁸⁸ A.F.M. 989.6

⁸⁹ A.F.M. 991.7

⁹⁰ Byrne, *The rise of the Uí Néill*, p. 20.

every garth (*garda*) on every Christmas Eve forever'.⁹¹ This was probably part of the ongoing political relationship between Mide and Dublin, as there is substantial archaeological evidence for the presence of ninth and tenth-century hoards of Viking armlets, hack silver and ingots and Hiberno-Norse, Anglo-Saxon and Kufic coins in the western part of Mide (and yet none from Tethba). These silver hoards are typically found in the lakelands (e.g. Lough Ennell, Derravarragh, Lene, Owel), either actually on the lakeshores (particularly around Lough Ennell, at Dysart and Carrick) or on crannogs or islands (e.g. Castle Island, Lough Lene, Coolure Demesne, Lough Derravarragh, Dysart Island, Lough Ennell). They indicate a growing interest in a silver economy amongst the Irish and probably arrived in the midlands as the result of regional trade, attacks and raids on Dublin, and as political tribute from Hiberno-Norse population to the kings of Mide.⁹²

It is also clear that Máel Sechnaill's royal residence was at the crannog of Cróinis and the ringfort at Dún na Sciath, on the shores of Lough Ennell (with a neighbouring monastic site at Dysart, or Dísert Máele Tuile). Upon his death in AD 1022, the *Annals of the Four Masters* claim he was on Cróinis at the time, while the *Annals of Clonmacnoise* add that Cróinis was 'near his house of Doone Sgiath'.⁹³ The two entries read as follows,

Maoileachlainn Mór, mac Domhnaill, mic Donnchadha, tuir ordain, & oireachais iarthair dhomhain, do écc h-í c-Cró Inis Lócha h-Ainind...

Maelseachlainn Mor, son of Domhnall, son of Donnchadh, pillar of the dignity and nobility of the west of the world, died on Cro-inis Locha-Aininn...⁹⁴

King Myleseachlin McDonnell McDonogh king of all Ireland, having triumphantly reigned over all Ireland, and his enemies the Danes, died in Croinnis upon Logh

⁹¹ *Ann Tig.* 988

⁹² Ryan *et al.*, 'Six silver finds of the Viking period from the vicinity of Lough Ennell', pp 334-81; Michael Dolley, 'An ex voto of eleventh-century silver coins from Co. Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 6, no. 3 (1977), pp 17-22; Michael Kenny, 'A find of Anglo-Saxon pennies from Newtownlow' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 7, no. 3 (1984), pp 37-43; Michael Kenny, 'Hiberno-Norse and Anglo-Saxon coins from north Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 7, no. 4 (1985-86), pp 22-7; Michael Kenny, 'Anglo-Saxon pennies from Moyvore, Co. Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe* 8, no. 2 (1988-89), pp 60-3; Michael Kenny, 'The Bulgars and Ballymore: An unusual coin find in Co. Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe* 8, no. 3 (1990-91), pp 69-71; Michael Kenny, 'The geographical distribution of Irish Viking-Age coin hoards' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 87c (1987), pp 515-7. Mary Valante, 'Dublin's economic relations with hinterland and periphery in the later Viking Age' in Seán Duffy (ed.), *Medieval Dublin 1* (Dublin, 2000), pp 69-83.

⁹³ A possible eleventh-century poem 'Alas for thy state, O Dun na Sciath' bemoans the death of Maelsechlainn, referring to the playing of games, the drinking of ale and the payment of the poet on the fort; Kuno Meyer, *Ancient Irish poetry* (London, 1911), p. 77. John O'Donovan provides a more accurate translation, including its references to the 'green' on its smooth mount' and it as being a 'green rath of beautiful form'.

⁹⁴ *A.F.M.* 1022.2

Innill near his house of Doone Sgiath in the 43 year of his reign in the fourth of the noones of September, the Sunday next before the feast day of St. Queran in the year of our Lord 1022. The archbishop of Armach, the cowarb of Columbkille and the cowarb of St. Queran being present, after he received the sacrament of extreme Unction, died a good death.⁹⁵

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the Clann Cholmáin dynasty was not to build on the political achievements of Mael Sechnaill II and ultimately they collapsed, despite the fact that their territories were the natural hinterland of Hiberno-Norse Dublin with its growing wealth.⁹⁶ Politically, there was to be a vacuum of power in the midlands, and the incipient lordship of Mide became dominated by its neighbours. Thence, in AD 1116, Toirdelbach Ua Conchobair (king of Connacht) raided 'iarthar Mide' (west Mide), while in AD 1130, Diarmait Ua Maél Sechlainn, king of Mide was killed by Tigernán Ua Ruairc, king of Breifne (the region in the vicinity of modern Cavan), while in AD 1141, Murchad ua Máel Sechlainn (obit 1153), king of Mide submitted, at Uisnech, to Ua Conchobair.

Anglo-Norman colonisation and continuity

By the time of the Anglo-Norman invasion (AD 1169), the Uí Máelsechlainn were kings of the western part of Mide only, and the expansion of the colony was to reduce their territories further, to the bogs, woodlands and marshes of the southwest of Co. Westmeath (the barony of Clonlonan).⁹⁷ In April 1172, the Welsh marcher lord, Hugh De Lacy was issued with a charter granting him the whole of the ancient kingdom of Mide, 'as Murchada Ua Maél Sechnaill held it' (i.e. in AD 1153, thus ignoring the potential complexities of more recent and rival claimants to the territory).⁹⁸ It has been suggested that the Anglo-Norman lordship of Meath itself was essentially based on pre-existing boundaries and territorial divisions, while continuity can also be seen in location of new centres of power.⁹⁹

In the late twelfth and early thirteenth centuries, De Lacy set about establishing control in his lordship through subinfeudation (i.e. by granting large areas of land to sub-tenants)

⁹⁵ *Ann. Clon.* 1022; Warner, 'On crannogs and kings', p. 63, suggests that the phrase 'near his house at Doone na sciath' indicates that the ringfort was the main royal residence, while the crannog was merely an adjunct. However, it is more probable that the crannog was actually the *most* socially exclusive space within a complex of royal dwellings on the lakeshore.

⁹⁶ Byrne, *The rise of the Uí Néill*, p. 21; Byrne, *Irish kings and high-kings*, p. 268.

⁹⁷ Walsh, *Westmeath*, p xxxiii, p. 329.

⁹⁸ J.F. Lydon, *The lordship of Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 1972), pp 44-5 ; Michael Potterton, 'The archaeology and history of medieval Trim, Co. Meath'. Unpublished PhD thesis, N.U.I. (Maynooth, 2002), p. 1.

⁹⁹ Edel Bhreathnach, 'Authority and supremacy in Tara and its hinterland c.950-1200' in *Discovery*

and the construction of a network of fortified strongholds. Mottes (large, flat-topped mounds surmounted by timber castles) and motte-and-baileys were built at places like Killare (AD 1184), Kilbixy, near Uisnech (AD 1192), at Fore (a significant monastic centre), Lough Sewdy, at Ballymore (a De Lacy stronghold after AD 1187) and Rathconrath (AD 1191).¹⁰⁰ Most of these, and others not mentioned in surviving documents, were *capite* of principal land grants of the subinfeudation. It is apparent that some of them were constructed directly on or near pre-existing early medieval Gaelic Irish lordly sites, such as raised ringforts and crannogs. The early medieval royal site or *caput* of the Uí Fhindalláin in Delbna was at Telach Cail (Castletown Delvin, in the barony of Delvin). This was replaced by the Anglo-Norman 'castle of Talaghkuil', a motte and an impressive masonry castle in the modern village of Delvin.¹⁰¹ Similarly, there was an early medieval Gaelic royal site of the Clann Cholmáin at Ruba Chonaill (at Rathconnell, on a hill 3km northeast of Mullingar and southwest of Lough Sheever), which may originally have served in the eleventh and twelfth century as a *caput* or administrative centre of the king of Mide.¹⁰² This site of Ruba Chonaill was probably taken over by the Anglo-Norman Adam de Feipo (of Skreen, Co. Meath) who built his motte at 'Rathconnell'. The presence there of a motte, castle and parish church suggests that it was indeed appropriated by the Anglo-Norman colonists.¹⁰³

Certainly, at both Lough Sewdy and Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath, these Anglo-Norman mottes effectively appropriate the power and traditional associations of pre-existing early medieval Gaelic Irish crannogs. At Newtownlow, a significantly wealthy and strategically placed (beside an esker routeway) early medieval crannog had been occupied in the tenth and eleventh century. It appears to have been replaced by an impressive flat-topped motte with a circular stone tower in the twelfth to thirteenth century (see Appendix 2). Similarly, at Lough Sewdy, at Ballymore, an impressive earthen motte-and-bailey is sited on the southern shore of the lake, overlooking its islands, some of which were probably Irish royal sites since the seventh century AD (see above).

Programme Reports 5 (Dublin, 1999), pp 1-23, at p. 15-16.

¹⁰⁰ B.J. Graham, 'The mottes of the Norman liberty of Meath' in Harman Murtagh (ed.), *Irish midland studies: Essays in commemoration of N.W. English* (Athlone, 1980), pp 39-56.

¹⁰¹ M.T. Flanagan, 'Anglo-Norman change and continuity: The castle of Telach Cail in Delbna' in *I.H.S.*, 28 (1993), pp 385-9, at p. 388.

¹⁰² Doherty, 'The Vikings in Ireland', pp 328-9. This is the archaeological complex of motte, castle and church situated at Rathconnell (A.S.I. Files Westmeath RMP WM 019-040, WM 019-041).

¹⁰³ Doherty, 'The Vikings in Ireland', p.328; Elizabeth Hickey, *Skreen and the early Normans* (n.p., 1994), pp 146-7.

In the fourteenth century, some of these Anglo-Norman territories were recovered during the Gaelic resurgence.¹⁰⁴ These included the Magawleys of Calry, the O'Breens of Brawny, the MacCoghlan of Delvin and the Maceoghegans of Kinelagh (originally Cinél Fiachach). Similarly, the border areas of Westmeath passed out of government control in the latter part of the fourteenth century with the gaelicization of some Anglo-Norman lordships, including the Daltons, Dillons, Tyrrells and the Delamares. Although there is less evidence for late medieval re-occupation on crannogs in Westmeath than elsewhere in Gaelic Ireland, it did occur. For example, a fifteenth century towerhouse was constructed and occupied on the island of Cróinis, probably by the O'Coffeys.

Early medieval settlement and landscape in Westmeath

Introduction

Westmeath has rich archaeological evidence for early medieval settlement and landscape, although it has received surprisingly little scholarly attention. The archaeological survey of the county completed in the 1980s is only available in archival form (i.e. the files and maps of the RMP) and there have been surprisingly few published overviews of the early medieval archaeology of the county. Intriguingly, there have been remarkably few archaeological excavations of early medieval settlements in Westmeath, including only seven or eight ringforts (apart from the high status site on the Hill of Uisnech, see below). Indeed, this fits with the peculiarly little attention that has been paid to the archaeology of the north midlands in general. This preliminary survey of early medieval settlement and landscape in Westmeath is intended then only as a brief background (Fig. 5.8).

Early medieval ringforts in Co. Westmeath

Ringforts are easily the most common early medieval settlement type in Westmeath, with at least 1326 definite ringforts (raths/cashels) identified. Their wide distribution across the landscape testifies to their significant social and economic role, while their clustering and spatial relations indicates the importance of such concepts as clientship, neighbourhood and kinship. In general terms, it is clear that ringforts in Westmeath, as elsewhere, were located with the practical realities of farming in mind, as they are predominantly located on good, well-drained soils, usually over the 100m contour, close to a water source. They typically avoid the county's lowlying lake marshes, bogs and hill-tops.

¹⁰⁴ K.W. Nicholls, *Gaelic and Gaelicized Ireland in the Middle Ages* (Dublin, 2003), pp 208-11.

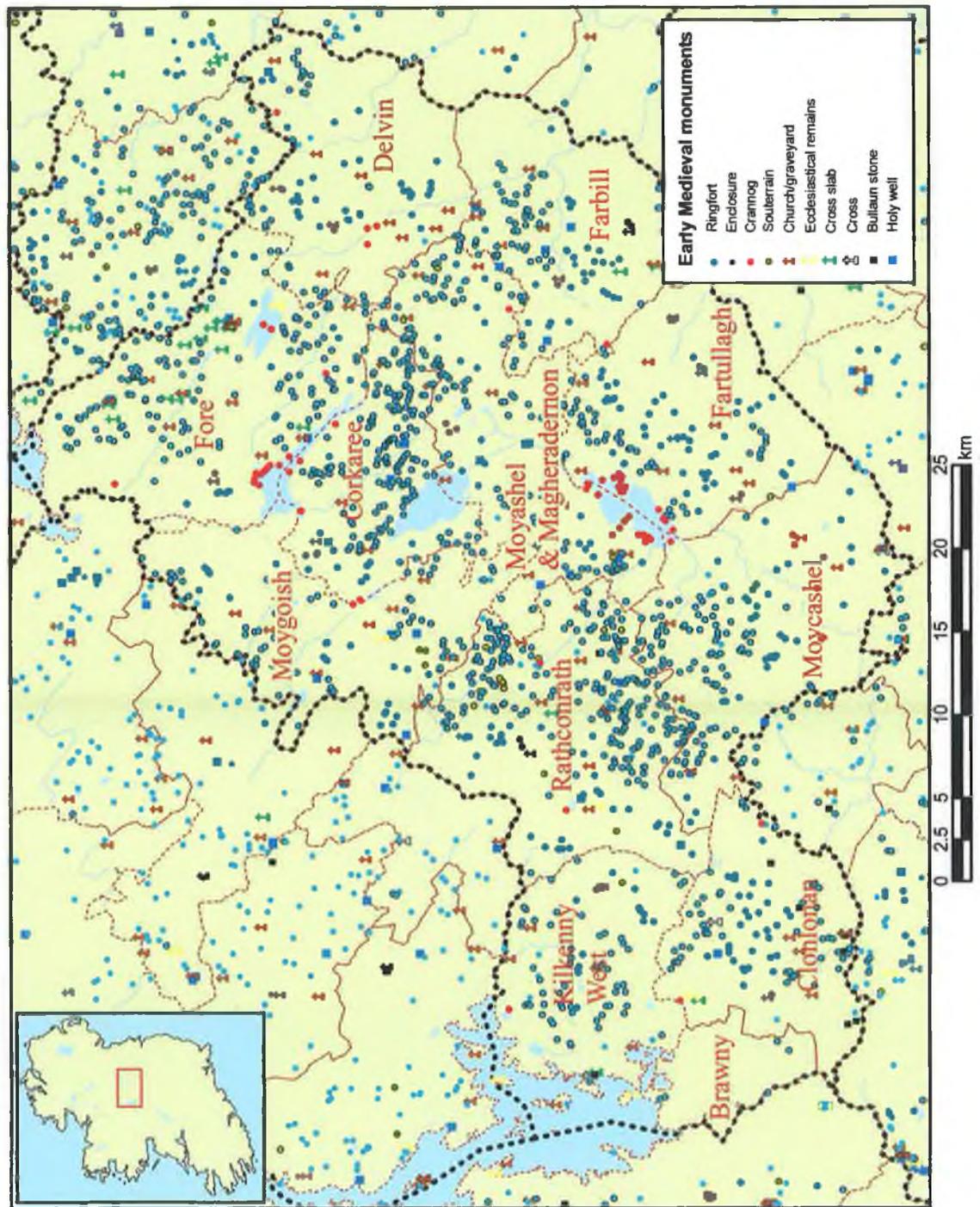


Fig. 5.8 Early medieval settlement and landscape in Westmeath. Map illustrating density and distribution of ringforts, crannogs, souterrains, holy wells, churches, bullaun stones and crosses. (based on Westmeath RMP and author's surveys)

They are also clearly influenced in their siting by routeways, as they often are located in proximity to the ridge-lines, moraines and eskers that are common in the region.

These ringforts vary in morphology, from simple univallate enclosures, to bivallate ringforts in strategic locations, to the raised raths or platform ringforts (e.g. at Dún na Sciath) that may have been lordly sites towards the end of the period. Only a few ringforts have been recently excavated in Westmeath (e.g. Marlinstown, Petits wood, Portashangan 1 & 3, Lackan) and only one of these has produced good occupation evidence.¹⁰⁵ At Marlinstown, near Mullingar, an oval-shaped univallate ringfort was enclosed within a bank and ditch, with a simple entrance leading into an internal space where there was a metalworking area (with a bowl furnace), with finds including crucible fragments, iron slag, bronze rings and pins and animal bone. Intriguingly, the Marlinstown ringfort was also used for human burial, with at least 14 skeletons recovered from its ditches and surface, possibly after the digging of an internal ditch on the site. Other early medieval enclosures in Ireland have produced similar evidence, suggesting that dwelling enclosures often seem to shift in function towards ritual or burial activity across time, before reverting to a more domestic role.

The north midlands, wherein Westmeath lies, is an area of high density of ringfort distribution (i.e. with a distribution of 0.81 per km²) in Ireland.¹⁰⁶ In terms of Westmeath itself, ringforts are quite densely distributed in the centre of the county, particularly in the barony of Corkaree (1.67 per km²), while there is also relatively high densities in the barony of Rathconrath (1.21km per km²) and of Moyashel and Mageradernon (0.8 per km²).¹⁰⁷ The dense distribution of ringforts in these baronies probably relates to diverse social, political and environmental factors. It is notable that within these baronies, ringforts are typically located on good quality, well-drained agricultural lands, on the extensive grey brown podzolic soils. They probably represent the settlements and socio-economic activities of the more prosperous social classes, including kings, nobles and free commoners, particularly the free and base client farmers.

¹⁰⁵ V.J. Keely, 'Marlinstown', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1990* (Dublin, 1991), no. 113, p. 55; V.J. Keely, 'Marlinstown', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1991* (Dublin, 1992), no. 126, p. 46; V.J. Keely, 'Petitswood', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1990* (Dublin, 1991), no. 115, p. 56; V.J. Keely, 'Portashangan 1 & 3', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1991* (Dublin, 1992), no. 116 & 117, p. 46; Sylvia Desmond, 'Lackan, Multyfarnham' in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1999* (Dublin, 2000), no. 872, p. 300.

¹⁰⁶ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, Fig. 13, pp 77-8.

¹⁰⁷ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, Fig. 11.

There are also particular geographical patterns within these clusters that can be discerned. There is a dense linear distribution running across the southern part of the barony of Rathconrath, to the west of Lough Ennell and to the south of the Hill of Uisneach, the prehistoric and early historic symbolic and ritual centre of Mide. Rathconrath was originally within the territories of the Cenél Fiachach and Cenél nÉndai, but after the sixth century was within the heartlands of the powerful Clann Cholmáin dynasty of the southern Uí Néill. It is likely that Uisnech, like Tara, Rathcroghan and Emain Macha, was a significant Late Bronze Age and Iron Age 'royal site'. In the early medieval period, beginning as early as the fourth to fifth century, it was clearly of some significance to local tribal groups. By the sixth and the seventh century, the power of the hill appears to have been appropriated by the southern Uí Néill, and their kings were frequently termed the 'king of Uisnech'. Interestingly, a large early medieval tri vallate ringfort (which has produced houses, souterrains and a range of early medieval finds) was placed directly on top of an Iron Age enclosure, thus deliberately creating a continuity with the pagan past. Similar connections between early medieval ringforts and prehistoric ceremonial monuments have also been identified at Rath of the Synods (Tara) and at Knowth, so it is likely that this was a deliberate act, perhaps carried out by an incoming population to establish a link with the hill's mythical past.¹⁰⁸

There is also a dense distribution of ringforts in the southeast end of the barony of Corkaree, in the hilly country between Lough Owel and Lough Derravarragh. This was within the early medieval political territory of the Corco Roide. It is also good agricultural land, with grey brown podzolics over a limestone geology. In the barony of Fartullagh (the kingdom of Fir Tulach), there is a medium density of ringforts. Elsewhere and around the borders of the county, ringforts are slightly less densely distributed in the baronies of Kilkenny West, Brawny, Clonlonan, Moycashel, Fartullagh, Farbill, Delvin, Fore and Moygoish (all 0.4 per km²). There are also regions within the county where there are few, if any, ringforts. Occasionally, this is explicable in terms of the presence of lowlying, wetland soils of raised bogs, fens and gleys. This is particularly noticeable in the paucity of ringforts in Moygoish (the seventh to eighth century territories of the Uí Maccu Uais Midi and the Bre craige) to the northwest of Lough Derravarragh and running southwestwards along the River Inny. Much of this region is essentially raised bogs and gleys, lands typically avoided by ringfort dwellers. There is also a markedly low

¹⁰⁸ R.A.S. Macalister and R.L. Praeger, 'Report on the excavation of Uisnech' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 38c (1928), pp 69-127; Caroline Donaghy and Eoin Grogan, 'Navel-gazing at Uisnech, Co. Westmeath' in *Arch. Ire.*, 42 (1997), pp 24-6.

distribution to the southeast of Westmeath, in the barony of Farbill. This can also be explained by the prevalence of raised bog on the border with Co. Meath. However, although environmental factors are important, it is clear that the densest areas of ringfort distributions are within the significant political territories of the seventh to ninth centuries, reflecting the power and wealth particularly of the Clann Cholmáin and their vassal peoples.

Early medieval souterrains and unenclosed settlements in Co. Westmeath

Other indicators of early medieval settlement are souterrains, of which there are at least 37 recorded sites in Westmeath. In terms of their distribution, these souterrains are found around the county but they are particularly concentrated in the barony of Rathconrath. There, they essentially mirror the concentrations of ringforts found in that barony, but with clusters around Moyvore and the Hill of Uisneach, again within the traditional heartlands of the Clann Cholmáin.¹⁰⁹ Some early medieval souterrains have been found associated with ringforts, as at Lackan (overlooking Lough Derravarragh at Multyfarnham), Gorteen, Rathnew (Uisnech), Togherstown and Coyne, Co. Westmeath, and with early medieval churches, as at Knockmant and Fore, Co. Westmeath.¹¹⁰ However, not all are associated with ringforts. Some, such as the souterrains at Reynella and Banagher, Co. Westmeath appear to have been associated with open or unenclosed settlements, similar to the sites that have been located in Louth and north Meath.¹¹¹ It is possible that these souterrains also reflect the emergence of unenclosed settlements in the tenth and eleventh century, but this is impossible to establish.

Early medieval ecclesiastical settlement in Co. Westmeath

There is also a wide range of evidence for early medieval churches and ecclesiastical enclosures in Westmeath (Fig. 5.9). Within the Westmeath RMP, there are 78 churches, 27 church and graveyards, 8 ecclesiastical remains, 39 holy wells, 9 bullaun stones, 22 crosses and 4 cross-slabs. However, this is obviously a crude record, as many of the

¹⁰⁹ Victor Buckley, 'Meath souterrains: some thoughts on Early Christian distribution patterns', in *Ríocht na Midhe* 8, no. 2, (1988-89), pp 64-7.

¹¹⁰ E.P. Kelly, 'A souterrain at Knockmount, Co. Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe* 7, no. 2 (1982-83), pp 114-18; E. Prendergast, 'Ringfort with souterrain at Gorteen, Co. Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe* 2, no. 1 (1959), pp 45-8; Macalister and Praeger, 'Report on the excavation of Uisnech'; R.A.S. Macalister and R.L. Praeger, 'The excavation of an ancient structure on the townland of Togherstown, Co. Westmeath' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 39c (1929-31), pp 54-83; R.E. Glasscock, 'Two raths in Coyne townland, Co. Westmeath' in *Journal of the Old Athlone Society*, 1 (1969-75), pp 230-1; Clinton, *The souterrains of Ireland*, p. 48.

¹¹¹ R. Murray, 'A souterrain near Reynella, Co. Westmeath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 62 (1932), pp 224-5; N.M.I. Top. Files, Banagher, Co. Westmeath; Geraldine Stout and Matthew Stout, 'Early landscapes: from prehistory to plantation' in F.H.A. Aalen, Kevin Whelan, Matthew Stout (eds.),

churches, for example, are likely to be late medieval parish churches or even post-medieval sites. However, Swan's studies of early medieval ecclesiastical settlement has produced significant and interesting results. Through a detailed analysis of early historical sources, cartographic sources and archaeological survey (particularly aerial photography), he was able to identify 95 ecclesiastical sites that are likely to be *early medieval* in date. Previously, 29 early medieval ecclesiastical sites had been identified from historical sources, but Swan's work showed that 66 further sites could be identified through archaeological fieldwork. Swan's research also revealed that a significant proportion of the county's modern parishes had only one early medieval church, suggesting that their boundaries originate in the early Middle Ages.¹¹²

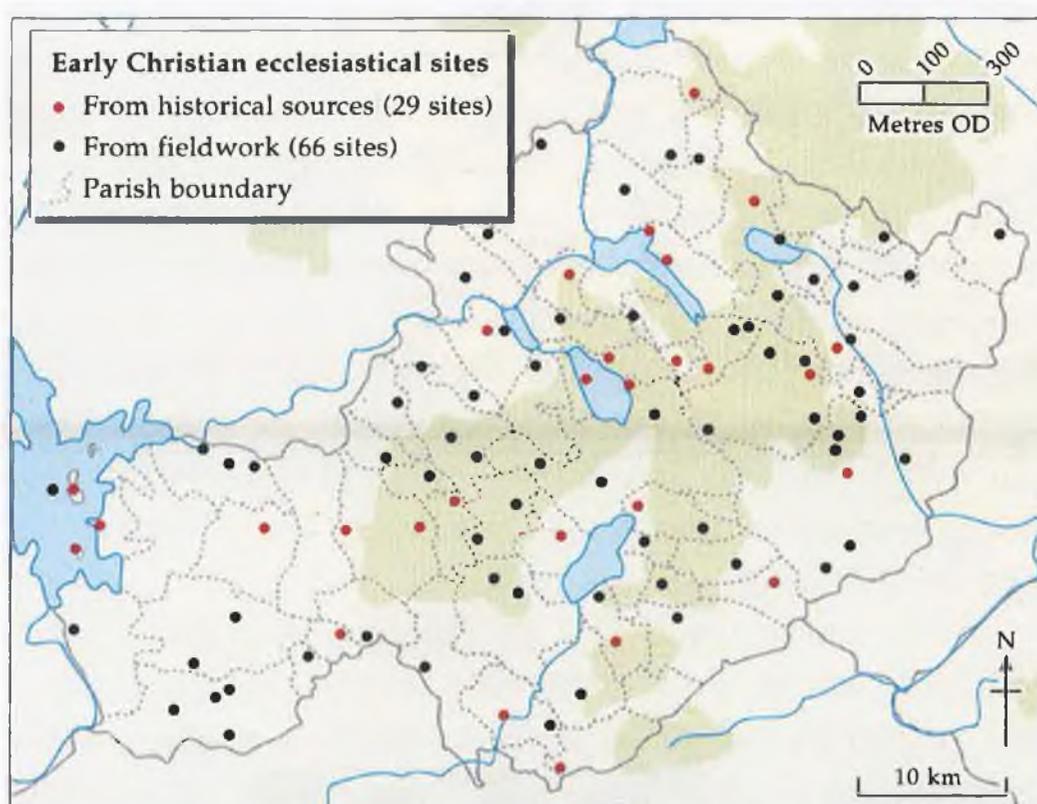


Fig. 5.9 Early medieval churches in Westmeath. Most of the county's parishes have one early church site suggesting that parish boundaries have their origins in the early Middle Ages. (Source: F.H.A. Allen *et al* eds. *The Atlas of the Irish rural landscape* (Cork, 1997), p. 52).

Atlas of the Irish rural landscape (Cork, 1997), pp 31-61, especially Fig. 48.

¹¹² Swan, 'The Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', pp 3-32.

Early medieval ecclesiastical sites in Westmeath commonly have a church ruin (often late medieval, but occasionally with Romanesque features), a burial or graveyard. Other indicators of early medieval origins may include the local placename (e.g. Kilpatrick) or local folklore linking the site to a saint. Some sites have produced carved, inscribed or decorated crosses or cross-slabs (mostly in the southwest).¹¹³ Souterrains, pillar stones, founder's tombs or burials are occasional, but rarer. A large (i.e. 90-120m average diameter) oval, circular or rectilinear bank and ditch or stone enclosure may also be present around the site, often preserved in outline in townland boundaries, field walls or roadways.¹¹⁴ A holy well and bullaun stone may be found near or on the periphery of the site.

Only a few sites have been investigated, the most important excavations being those at Kilpatrick (Corbettstown, barony of Farbill, in southeast Westmeath). The Kilpatrick excavations revealed something of the daily life and work of a small church settlement. It was a church and graveyard enclosed within an oval enclosure (90m x 80m), defined by a stone-faced bank and a deep ditch. Within this outer enclosure was found some evidence for an inner enclosure, circular houses, hearths, pits and other structures. Finds from within and around the circular house included a pennanular brooch, crucible fragments, a mould for casting rings and evidence for antler working and iron working. The site had probably been occupied from the eighth century to the thirteenth century AD.¹¹⁵

In general, it has been suggested that early medieval churches and ecclesiastical enclosures tend to be found on low-lying ground, often close to roads and rivers (which served both as routeways and boundaries), avoiding uplands (rarely being above the 120m contour). Stout has also strongly argued from the saints' lives that the church's economy was largely based on ploughlands and tillage, although this has not received complete acceptance.¹¹⁶ It has also been suggested that churches in the midlands (i.e.

¹¹³ T. Fanning and P. Ó hÉailidhe, 'Some cross-inscribed slabs from the Irish midlands' in H. Murtagh (ed.), *Irish midland studies* (Athlone, 1980), pp 5-23.

¹¹⁴ Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', p. 4.

¹¹⁵ D.L Swan, 'Excavations at Kilpatrick churchyard, Killucan, Co. Westmeath 1973 and 1975' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 6, no. 2 (1976), pp 89-96; Leo Swan, 'Excavations at Kilpatrick, Killucan, Co. Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 9, no. 1 (1995), pp 1-21; Leo Swan, 'Fine metalwork from the early Christian site at Kilpatrick, Co. Westmeath' in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *From the Isles of the North: Early medieval art in Britain and Ireland* (Belfast, 1995), pp 75-80.

¹¹⁶ D.L Swan, 'Enclosed ecclesiastical sites and their relevance to settlement patterns of the first millennium A.D.' in T. Reeves-Smyth and N. Hammond (ed.), *Landscape archaeology in Ireland*, British Archaeological Reports, British Series 116 (London, 1983), pp 269-94, at p. 273; Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, pp 100-105; Michael Ryan, 'The Irish ringfort: Book review' in *History Ireland*, 5,

Offaly) are found at the periphery of densest ringfort distributions, suggesting that churches were being established on political boundaries and in poor agricultural lands (perhaps being granted lands by local secular elites in precisely these locations).¹¹⁷

Traditionally, it been thought the church in Ireland was organised into widely dispersed and overlapping monastic federations or *paruchia*, but this model has now been largely undermined.¹¹⁸ Recent studies suggest that the church in early medieval Ireland was organised along local territorial lines, as elsewhere in Europe. Churches, particularly the most important ones, controlled considerable territories in their immediate vicinity and were affiliated with other smaller churches in the same secular kingdom as themselves. In other words, churches should be studied in the context of their local settlement landscapes.¹¹⁹

Indeed, it is clear that the church held extensive lands across early medieval Mide. For example, in the *Life* of Colmáin maic Lúachain, the eleventh/twelfth century lands owned by the church of Lynn, a monastery on the northeast shore of Lough Ennell, are described in detail.¹²⁰ The *Life* indicates that the monastic lands of Lynn were extensive and probably included much of the present parish of Lynn, including the area in which Mullingar now stands, as well as properties right across Meath and Westmeath.¹²¹ Like most hagiographies, the *life* describes the saint's miraculous activities around Mide, particularly in the vicinity of Lough Ennell, and thus bolsters the founder's reputation. However, the detailed descriptions of lands, churches and places were probably mainly intended to provide documentary evidence of the church's land holdings and territorial claims (at a time when the church felt threatened by twelfth century ecclesiastical reform and the increasing influence of the newly endowed Augustinian and Cistercian orders).¹²² The *life* was probably also written to avoid secular taxation, as it clearly defines the limits of the latter on the church.

no. 4 (1997), pp 54-5.

¹¹⁷ Stout, 'Early Christian settlement, society and economy in Offaly', pp 35-6.

¹¹⁸ Etchingam, *Church organisation in Ireland A.D. 600 to 1000*.

¹¹⁹ Ó Carragáin, 'Early church organisation on Iveragh and Dingle', p. 130.

¹²⁰ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*; Paul Walsh, 'The topography of Betha Colmáin', pp 568-82. The *life* was written in the twelfth century, after the discovery of the saint's relics; *A.U.* 1122.2; *Scrín Cholmáin m Luachain d'fhoghbhail I n-ailaidh Lainne ferchubát I talmhain dia Cetain in Braith*. ('The shrine of Colmán son of Luachán was found in the burial place of Lann [Ela], a man's cubit in earth, on Spy Wednesday [22 March]').

¹²¹ Doherty, 'The Vikings in Ireland: a review', p. 318.

¹²² Bhreathnach, '*A Midhe is maith dá bhámar* : thoughts on medieval Mide'

In general, early medieval church sites in Westmeath are quite widely distributed across the county and there is little evidence for dense concentrations. There are slightly more churches within the baronies of Rathconrath, Corkaree and Fartullagh, but this mirrors the dense early medieval settlement already represented by the ringforts and souterrains in those baronies. The churches are also often, though by no means always, found close to parish and barony boundaries.¹²³ It is interesting then that several early medieval ecclesiastical sites (with churches, graveyards and crosses) have also been found on, or close to, lakeshores, places that might be considered to be on significant boundaries. Early medieval churches found close to lakes include those at Lackan, Kiltoom and Faughalstown (on Lough Derravarragh), Lynn and Dysart (on Lough Ennell), Church Island (on an island on Lough Owel), Tristernagh (on Lough Iron), Kilnahinch (at Ballinderry Lough), as well as Hare Island, Inchmore, Nun's Island and Inchbofin (all monastic islands on Lough Ree).¹²⁴

Regional and local landscape perspectives on crannogs in early medieval Westmeath

Introduction

The early medieval settlement landscapes of Westmeath are rich in archaeological evidence for the inhabitation and use of lakeshores, islands and crannogs. Although there are other regions (e.g. drumlin lakelands) where crannogs are more densely distributed, Westmeath's crannogs have some of the best historical and archaeological evidence in Ireland for use in the early Middle Ages. It is interesting then to query why early medieval people chose to build and live on crannogs in a landscape where there were plenty of other options. In this section, I begin to explore regional and local perspectives to landscapes of lake dwellings in early medieval Westmeath. Where early medieval communities chose to build a crannog in the landscape obviously depended on a range of factors: social, political, economic and historical. It is possible to recognise some of these in the siting and location of crannogs in the landscape. In the following section, such factors as geology, soils, agricultural land, navigable rivers, lake type and size, proximity or distance from local archaeological sites will be briefly considered.

There is a minimum of 64 crannogs in Co. Westmeath. At least 19 have produced scientific or artefactual evidence for the date of their use or occupation. In almost all

¹²³ Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', Fig. 1.1.

¹²⁴ Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', p. 9-31, sites no. 1, 67, 66, 31, 86, 87, 36, 17, 51, 52, 53, 59.

cases this is in the early medieval period, between the seventh and the eleventh century AD (for dating evidence of crannogs in Westmeath, see Table 6.1 and also dendrochronological dates in Table 6.2). The Westmeath RMP currently includes records for only 29 sites, but research carried out for this study, based on both the previous archaeological surveys of the Crannog Archaeological Project in the 1990s and this author's recent surveys (June-September 2002, June-July 2003) on Lough Ennell and Lough Derravarragh has increased this figure to 64 (which includes 22 sites on Lough Ennell and 18 sites on Lough Derravarragh). There are probably many more crannogs that have not been yet identified, submerged underwater or hidden in lakeshore vegetation around the county's other lakes. The records of the National Museum of Ireland also include numerous metal-detected finds from lakes, some of which were probably on islands or crannogs.¹²⁵ It is also likely that a much more ambitious programme of archaeological survey and underwater search could increase (possibly by about up to 30 per cent, if this study's results on Lough Derravarragh is typical) the number of crannogs in the county.

Siting in relation to topography, geology and soils

In topographical terms, Westmeath is generally a lowlying county, of lakes, fens and marshes set amongst low-lying, rolling hillocks and ridges deriving from its geology and glacial geomorphology. Thence, there is not a significant variation in the altitude or siting of crannogs in terms of topography (i.e there are no 'upland crannogs'), although most are found in the lakes and marshes of the hilly country in the middle of the county.

The bedrock geology is also quite similar across Westmeath, being mostly either of Viséan Lucan formation dark limestones and shales and Derravarragh cherty limestone, so this is hardly a locational factor. However, what is clear is that this geology has had a *profound effect* on crannog construction and morphology. The easy availability of limestone slabs, pebbles and stones around the storm beaches and eroding terraces of the county's lakes means that most crannogs in Westmeath were stone-built cairns. It is unlikely that the limestone slabs and pebbles were deliberately quarried (bedrock exposures are rare), but were simply gathered from surrounding fields and the exposed muds of lakes. Indeed, this can frequently be seen in the fabric of the cairns themselves, where weathered and wave-marked stones are often cast up onto the tops of cairns.

¹²⁵ Current research in the N.M.I., directed by Mr. Eamonn P. Kelly, aims to locate and clarify the underwater findspots of metal-detected artefacts in Co. Westmeath. Many of these finds and their files are still the subject of court action or ongoing confidential legal negotiations. Therefore, only information publicly available in the N.M.I. Topographical Files in the National Museum of Ireland

Furthermore, on some lakeshores (particularly Lough Derravarragh with its hard, limestone glacial till) it would have been difficult to drive in palisade posts, so wooden piles are infrequent. Towards the south and west, it appears that more boggy lakebeds tended to be the location of crannogs built of organic mounds of sods, clays and wood, most of which are retained within vertical piles that were easily driven into the muds (e.g. the early medieval crannogs of Newtownlow, Ballinderry crannog No. 1, Knockaville and Clonickilvant were all 'packwerk' crannogs of peat, timber and brushwood, contrasting with the stony cairns of Lough Ennell and Lough Derravarragh).

There are also interesting patterns in the siting and distribution of crannogs in relation to soils. Obviously, a substantial proportion of crannogs in Westmeath are found on waterlogged fen peats and occasionally under raised bogs are often found in close proximity to them. As these soil types typically fringe the lakes in which they are found, crannogs are also found adjacent to these soils (e.g. particularly at Clonickilvant, Ballinderry no. 1, Clonsura). At some sites (e.g. Clonsura, Dryderstown, Donore, on Lough Derravarragh), crannogs appear to be actually deliberately sited adjacent to raised bogs and fens, suggesting that proximity to these formidable boundaries and obstacles to travel may have been significant rather than accidental. Beyond these wetlands soils, crannogs are generally found adjacent to well-drained, good quality soils with a high agricultural potential and loading capacity. In Westmeath, the overall predominance of grey brown podzolic soils (both Rathowen and Patrickswell series) means that most places are in proximity to these soils, so there is little general statistical significance in the distribution of crannogs in relation to soils. However, at a local scale, it is clear that crannogs tend to be found closer to land with good agricultural potential (reckoned in terms of soils, drainage, slope, aspect and modern land use). This is evident at Lough Derravarragh, where most of the crannogs avoid those parts of the lakeshore where there are raised bogs (apart from Donore) or the lower-quality, limestone till soils (both Clonava island and the area around Derrya are soils of poorer agricultural potential and neither have crannogs off their shorelines). They also avoid the steeper slopes of the southeast end of the lake, where agricultural practices would be difficult.

Siting in relation to drainage, lakes and rivers

In drainage terms, the distribution of crannogs within the county suggests a strong concentration of sites around the lakes found on the River Inny and its tributaries (e.g. Lough Derravarragh, Lough Iron and Lough Sewdy) and on the lakes on the River

was used in this study.

Brosna drainage system (e.g. Lough Ennell, Newtownlow). These are the two major navigable rivers through the region, ultimately flowing into the River Shannon, the major routeway through the Irish midlands (as witnessed by the presence of Viking fleets from Limerick on Lough Ree in the ninth and tenth century). There are also several crannogs on the lakes along the smaller River Adeel (e.g. the 3 crannogs on Johnstown Lough and Lough Annala, collectively known as the 'Dysart Lakes') which drains into the River Boyne. This is a small river today, but may have been navigable in dugouts. It is also intriguing that some crannogs (e.g. Schoolboy Island, Rushy Island, Lady's Island and Bog Island on Lough Ennell, Donore on Lough Derravarragh, and Cullenhugh on Lough Iron) are found close to local river outlets and inlets into these lakes. This suggests an interest in observing these navigable rivers as they entered the lakes, for strategic or defensive reasons, or for controlling movement through the landscape.

There are interesting patterns in terms of Westmeath crannog distribution and the *size* of particular lakes. In smaller lakes (e.g. c.500m-1km in length; e.g. Bishops Lough, Doonis Lough, Twy Lough, Ballinderry Lough, Lough Annala, Mount Dalton Lough, White Lough, Newtownlow), there tends to be only a single crannog. This crannog is usually prominently placed, typically slightly towards one end of the lake. On slightly larger (i.e.2-3km across), lakes (e.g. the Lough Lene, Lough Sewdy, or perhaps the originally larger Dysart Lakes complex) there are rather more sites (2-3 sites), but they are widely spaced apart. Indeed, it is only on the significantly larger lakes, such as Lough Ennell (7km in length, 1300ha in area) and Lough Derravarragh (8km in length, 1080ha in area), that there are quite large numbers of crannogs (22 crannogs on Lough Ennell and 18 crannogs on Lough Derravarragh). This seems to indicate that crannogs would have effectively *dominated* the watery spaces of loughs in people's minds, so that small lakes can only contain one or two, while larger lakes were considered to have sufficient space to contain more sites. This is a phenomenon that has been previously noted by archaeological surveys in Fermanagh and Sligo (e.g. Lough Gara). It suggests that crannogs, with their high visibility and resounding, charismatic presence on the surface of the water had a significant impact on people's perception of space around lakes in early medieval Ireland. Obviously, this also would have had something to do with the ownership and use of the surrounding land.

Siting in relation to other archaeological sites

Isolation or proximity to nearby settlement sites are counterbalancing themes in the location of crannogs in Westmeath. A brief analysis of the *nearest archaeological sites* to each crannog reveals some basic patterns. The nearest archaeological sites to a large

proportion (29 sites, 44.6 per cent) of the county's crannogs are in fact other crannogs. This largely reflects the dense concentration of sites at Kiltoom on Lough Derravarragh, and at Rochfort Demesne, on Lough Ennell. At both locations, there is a cluster of 8-10 crannogs found in close proximity, suggesting either longevity, continuity or a sequence of use or the presence of a local community of households inhabiting the same lakeshore for a period of time. At other locations, such as Cullenhugh, on Lough Iron, and at Cróinis/Dysart, on Lough Ennell, there are also small groups (3-4 sites) of crannogs situated close together, albeit separated by stretches of water. Some early medieval crannogs, such as Dryderstown (Lough Annala) are located on lakes where there are other crannogs (e.g. Johnstown) at some distance (i.e. 500m).

A significantly high proportion (16 sites, 25 per cent) of Westmeath's crannogs are located near early medieval ringforts. At Cróinis (Lough Ennell), Coolure Demesne 1 (Lough Derravarragh), Derrynagarragh (Bishops Lough), Cherry Island (Lough Ennell) and Newtownlow, these crannogs are situated immediately adjacent to ringforts (typically within 200m) probably signifying that the ringfort/crannog pair served as an early medieval settlement complex. On other sites, there are ringforts in the locality, but not necessarily very close to the lake dwellings. Indeed, given the large number of ringforts in Westmeath, it is often inevitable that there are some ringforts close by. There are also a few isolated sites, where the nearest ringfort is actually at an appreciable distance. For example, at the early medieval crannog at Knockaville (Lough-a-Trim), the nearest archaeological site is a ringfort 2km to the west. Similarly, an undated possible crannog at Clonsura has a ringfort 2.6km to the east. Both of these have to be seen as isolated places in the landscape, but they are also located close to barony boundaries suggesting that they played some role in the marchlands between territories.

Other Westmeath crannogs have a range of different types of nearest archaeological site. These include earthworks (13 sites, 20 per cent), churches (1 site, 1.4 per cent), castles (4 sites, 6.2 per cent), mottes (1 site, 1.4 per cent) and a mill (1 site, 1.4 per cent). The earthworks may occasionally have been ringforts, as the high rate of archaeological site destruction in Westmeath means that it is often impossible to establish the original character of the site when it has been ploughed out. For example, at Kiltoom 10 (Lough Derravarragh), a crannog was situated in water off a lowlying terrace, where there were four earthworks. At least two of these were probably early medieval ringforts, but two may have been ring barrows, suggesting a Bronze Age/Iron Age and early medieval complex of archaeological sites at this location. There are certainly some crannogs that appear to be significantly isolated from other

archaeological sites, suggesting that they were deliberately located at places that may not have been densely settled, for reasons of security or to establish a presence in a region otherwise sparsely occupied. This can be deceptive, as at the early medieval crannog at Clonickilvant (White Lough), the nearest site is a mill at 850m distance, but there are at least 12 ringforts within a 2km distance, a densely occupied early medieval landscape.

It is also worth stating that early medieval crannogs would have been situated within archaeological landscape complexes, where the past histories and contemporary ideas about social status and role, land ownership and use would have been important. For example, there is an important archaeological landscape on the southwest shore of Lough Ennell, where the early medieval royal ringfort and crannog of the Clann Cholmáin is situated within a locality where there were also several ringforts, an early medieval church, holy well and earthworks in Dysart townland. Similarly, at the early medieval crannog at Ballinderry no. 1, there is an early medieval church at Kilnahinch, 220m to the south, but there are also early medieval ringforts on the hills across the bogs, 2km to the west. These early medieval settlement landscapes will be interpreted further below.

Siting in relation to early medieval settlement landscapes

In terms of potential early medieval settlement landscapes, it is possible to trace patterns in the broad distribution and density of crannogs within the county's modern baronies. It is likely that these baronies bear some general resemblance in location to known early medieval political territories, although they have been undoubtedly altered. There are higher densities within some baronies, particularly Moyashel & Magheradernon and Fartullagh (either side of Lough Ennell), and Fore and Corkaree (either side of Lough Derravarragh). In other baronies, there are only a few sites, with only 1 crannog in Clonlonan (Ballinderry crannog No. 1), 2 crannogs in Kilkenny West (Doonis, Twyford), 2 crannogs in Rathconrath (Shinglis, Loughan), 1 site (Knockaville) in Farbill, and 4 sites (Johnstown, Dryderstown, Kilrush Lr.) in Delvin.

It is intriguing though that crannogs often avoid those regions that seem to have been densely settled in the early medieval period, at least as far as this is indicated by the distribution of early medieval ringforts. Undoubtedly, the fact that crannogs are typically found in the more low-lying, marshy areas of the county, with their lakes and rivers, is a factor (normally landscapes that are low in ringfort density). In other words, ringforts are typically found on good, well-drained agricultural soils, above the 100m contour. Thence, the crannogs at Cullenhugh (Lough Iron) and Clonsura (Lough Bane)

are located in the lowlying, waterlogged landscapes of bogs, fens and gleys found in the north of the county, where there are actually very few ringforts. However, there are strong hints that crannog and ringfort distributions are actually indeed mutually exclusive. Thence, for example in the densely settled barony of Rathconrath, the two crannogs of Loughan (Mount Dalton) and Shinglis (Lough Sewdy) are situated well to the north of the main ringfort densities. Similarly, in the barony of Moyashel & Magheradernon, ringforts are infrequent on its southern boundary, thus avoiding the eastern shore of Lough Ennell. But this is precisely the location of the politically significant and evidently wealthy crannogs of the Clann Cholmáin at Cróinis, Dysart, Rushy Island and School Boy Island. Similarly, on Lough Derravarragh, a dense distribution of crannogs on the lake (particularly at the north end around Coolure Demesne and Kiltoom) is matched by a low-density and scattered distribution of ringforts around the lake.

So, it appears that crannogs tend to be found towards the edges of early medieval settlement landscapes. This could be interpreted in a number of ways. It is possible that crannogs served the function of ringforts, continuing early medieval settlement landscapes out onto wetlands. Alternatively, crannogs (like churches) were expressly serving as 'edge' or 'boundary' monuments, marking these spaces in some political or ideological way.

Siting in relation to early medieval political boundaries

In fact, it is clear that crannogs tend to be found close to, or even directly on, barony boundaries (Fig. 5.10). These barony boundaries, often running along major topographical features, such as rivers and lakes, may broadly correspond to those of the early medieval *tuath*. As many as 50 (79 per cent) of Westmeath's crannogs are located on, or close to, the barony boundaries. Indeed, it is striking that crannogs such as the early medieval crannogs at Knockaville (Lough-a-Trim), Clonickilvant (White Lough), as well as the undated sites at Twyford (Twy Lough) and Kilrush Lower are actually sited *directly on* the barony boundaries. Other early medieval crannogs, such as the Ballinderry No. 1, Newtownlow, and Cullenhugh (Lough Iron) sites and the undated site at Clonsura (Lough Bane) are also located quite close to barony boundaries (i.e. within 500m-1km). Most strikingly, the early medieval crannogs on Lough Ennell and Lough Derravarragh are also situated very close (within c.500-800m) to the barony boundaries. On Lough Ennell, the boundaries between the three baronies of Moyashel & Magheradernon, Fartullagh and Moycashel all run down the middle of the lake. In other words, Lough Ennell's crannogs are effectively overlooking a potential early medieval political

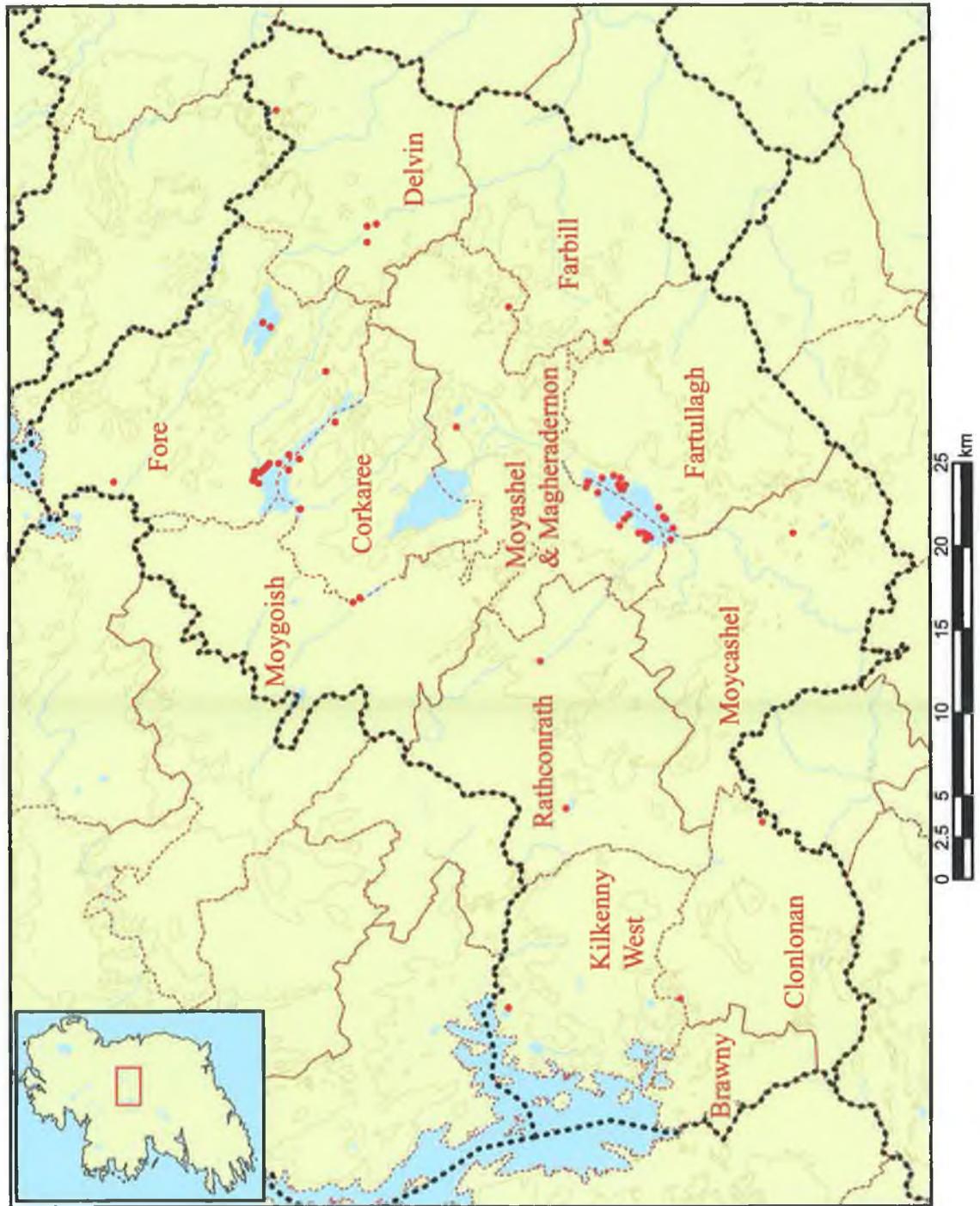


Fig. 5.10. Distribution of Westmeath's crannogs in relation to modern barony boundaries, indicating that as much as 79% per cent are on or close to the potential early medieval túath boundaries.

boundary. Similarly, on Lough Derravarragh, the barony boundaries between the three baronies of Fore, Corkaree and Moygoish runs down the middle of the lake, so that crannogs are again sited either side of it.¹²⁶ Similarly then, Lough Derravarragh's crannogs may also be sited overlooking a possible early medieval boundary between the early medieval kingdoms of Cúl Fobair (in Fore), the Uí Maccu Uais Midi (in Moygoish) and the Corco Roíde (in Corkaree).

It is possible then that crannogs in Westmeath were being deliberately used on early medieval political or territorial boundaries (in some cases, the actual boundary of the *túath*). In early medieval Ireland, boundaries were immensely important in social, ideological and political terms.¹²⁷ Their location and extent would have been passed down in oral traditions amongst the community and would have been identifiable by reference to natural and built features in the landscape. In early Irish law, boundaries could be marked by rocks, ditches, trees, roads and lanes, gravestones and burial mounds, and particularly by water (lakes, rivers and streams).

Building crannogs on lakes (i.e. mounds by water features) may have been a means of marking the boundary, and this could have been a phenomenon that waxed and waned even as population groups rose or fell in the eternal struggles for political power. The crannogs could have been placed on lakes to enable people to see across these boundaries, and additionally for them to be seen as aggressive and symbolic statements from an opposing territory (i.e. from the opposite shores). The inhabitation of a crannog on a boundary could have signified the high social status of its inhabitants (i.e. royal sites often being at edges of territories), or alternatively the social liminality and marginalisation (dwellings of the poor and landless at edge of lands) of its owners. They could also have had a politically strategic function (being a defensive or aggressive emplacement at a territorial boundary) within the community.

It is also possible that crannogs in Westmeath were located along regional and local routeways, as represented in particular by the River Inny and River Brosna, which ultimately connect with the River Shannon. There is not a contradiction between

¹²⁶ It is true that the modern barony boundaries run down the middle of lakes as a cartographic convention, much as they run down the middle of rivers. However, this does not take away from the fact that the lake itself remains the essential, defining boundary feature, and its broad surface could be seen as a wide, fluid (!) and permeable liminal space, easily crossed by boats but still symbolically and politically important.

¹²⁷ Ó Riain, 'Boundary association in early Irish society', pp 12-29; Charles-Edwards, 'Boundaries in Irish law', pp 83-7; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, p. 409.

communications routeways and political boundaries, as routeways are often the means of marking a boundary (i.e. roads and lanes), while contacts are often highly significant *across* territorial boundaries. Indeed, there may be correlations in Westmeath between the locations of early medieval crannogs and ecclesiastical sites (also found on routeway/boundaries). These ideas will be discussed in more detail below.

Islands, landscape and society in early medieval Westmeath

Introduction

Both historical and archaeological evidence indicates that crannogs played an important role in the social and political landscapes of early medieval Mide. It is possible to explore how they were used and thought about by investigating their social and ideological role in the landscape. This includes the use of early medieval crannogs by the powerful and elite (kings and lords) in society, who used crannogs to order, manipulate and control their role in society. However, it is also possible to discuss this in terms of social marginality, whereby the crannogs of the poor, the landless or dependant labourers also utilised crannogs for safety and protection, to identify with the social group or to gather beside their lord. This can best be achieved by sketching out scenarios in relation to particular early medieval crannogs in Westmeath.

Islands, power and performance in the social and ideological landscape

Kings and crannogs in early medieval Westmeath

In the early Middle Ages, crannogs were often used as power centres in the landscape, serving as royal residences, craft production and redistribution centres, places of refuge at times of danger and as defensive or military sites at the boundaries of political territories. Oddly, however, there has been little attempt to explore how this was achieved, in both a practical or a symbolic sense, within the landscapes that people inhabited. It would be worth exploring how crannogs were actively used by social elites as distinct places within what might be termed as topographies of power, to establish and negotiate power relationships within the wider early medieval landscape.

In the early Middle Ages, concepts of kingship were closely linked to ideas about personal status, ability and critically, *performance*. Within his own *túath*, the early medieval king was expected to carry out various tasks for the community. He was expected to maintain peace and prosperity, to negotiate agreements with (or submit to) other kings, to administer justice and exact fines, to convene public assemblies (including both the tribal *óenach* and the *airecht*). He was also expected to periodically move with his retinue around his territory, on a royal circuit. He also had a military role, being

expected to maintain a warrior retinue, to organise and go on raids and hostings into rival territories and to build and maintain strongholds to protect the community (although various grades of lords also had military obligations).

It is evident from the annals, saint's lives and narrative literature that kings were occasionally symbolically linked to particular lakes and islands. Indeed, the building of a crannog on a particular well-known lake may have served to link the king with the territory, as it denoted and established his physical presence on a significant topographical feature within the *túath* (the lake being potentially a sacred place, a historically well-known placename synonymous with the territory itself). It has also been argued in this chapter (see above), that the lake itself may also occasionally have served as a physical and political boundary between early medieval *túath*, so that the king would have been representing the *túath* to outsiders (another one of his roles) as well as projecting his power across into a rival territory. It has also been argued above (Chapter 4) that in ideological or symbolic terms, the king's crannog on a lake was placed on a critically important symbolic boundary or liminal space between this world and the otherworld (possibly signifying the king's role in mediating between the community and nature).

In building and occupying a crannog, the king (and his household) might have been attempting to establish a certain social distinction within the local community, by slightly removing himself, his household and retinue from the dwelling space of lower social classes. This social distance was achieved and manipulated both by the remoteness and inaccessibility of the island, as well as the island's distinctive profile and high visibility. In other words, the island could be witnessed, observed and wondered at by people on the shore, but they could not experience it for themselves unless invited (unless they were attacking it). Similarly access to the island could be regulated from a distance, with the owner of the island deciding who could and could not come out to it by boat.

Identifying royal crannogs in early medieval Westmeath

Recent studies of the archaeology of early Irish kingship have all suggested that it should be possible to identify early medieval royal residences by an analysis of their architecture and material culture. However, previous studies have been hampered by the fact that scholars have actually been referring to sites of quite different date and function. Wailes was actually writing about the major Iron Age royal sites (i.e. Tara, Cruachain, Dún Ailinne) when he suggested that they should be unusually large, with evidence for ritual

and residential activity and high-status living (possibly including rich burials).¹²⁸ More recently, Warner was *mostly* discussing early medieval royal residences when he suggested that they should have evidence for ritual activities, a small internal enclosed area, a complexity of enclosing features (i.e. multivallate earthworks), and evidence for wealth, substantial houses and industrial waste.¹²⁹ Indeed, Bolger sought to remedy this when she suggested that two different categories of sites should be distinguished in early medieval Brega; *royal sites* (e.g. prehistoric ceremonial complexes associated with early medieval kingship, *óenaig*, synods and assemblies, such as Tara, Taitiu, Tlachtga) and *political centres* (the domestic residences of a king or royal dynasty).¹³⁰ More recently, Warner has suggested that because some historically attested royal crannogs (e.g. Island MacHugh, Co. Tyrone) have not produced good evidence for occupation, that crannogs should be regarded as secondary or supplementary residences, perhaps even merely temporary refuges.¹³¹

However, *most* royal residences (like medieval palaces or the country houses of the upper social classes in Jane Austen's novels) were effectively temporary, as early Irish kings were frequently on the move on their royal circuits, travelling around their territories with their retinues, feasting in the houses of their clients and gathering food rent, taxes and political tribute. Early Irish kings also had principal residences, occupied for slightly longer periods of time where they themselves could host feasts and gatherings. It is evident that the really significant seats of power of the Clann Chólmáin kings of Mide were the ringfort and crannog at Dún na Sciath and Cróinis and a ringfort at Ruba Chonail, near Mullingar. In any case, it is likely that different types of places would be associated with the king. They could potentially include his inauguration site, some places of public assembly (often at prehistoric burial mounds), his various strategic or military strongholds, the churches and monastic enclosures he patronised, along with several residences that he inhabited at different times of the years.

It should still be possible to identify actual royal residences, places of major significance to the king and his court. It is accepted that some of these are crannogs. Using the evidence of historical sources and previously excavated sites (e.g. Lagore), it is possible

¹²⁸ Bernard Wailes, 'The Irish 'royal sites' in history and archaeology' in *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies*, 3 (1982), pp 1-29.

¹²⁹ R.B. Warner, 'The archaeology of early historic Irish kingship' in S.T. Driscoll and M.R. Níeke (eds.), *Power and politics in early medieval Britain and Ireland* (Edinburgh, 1988), pp 47-68, at p. 67.

¹³⁰ Teresa Bolger, 'A study of settlement in the kingdom of Brega in the 7th and 8th centuries AD. Unpublished M.Phil', N.U.I. (University College, Dublin, 1997), pp 115-6.

¹³¹ Warner, 'On crannogs and kings', pp 67-8.

to suggest that an early medieval royal crannog could have some of the following features

A location at a politically or strategically significant place in the early medieval *tíath* (central place, boundary association, proximity to significant routeways).

A locally inaccessible but not truly remote siting, preferably highly visible from a distance around the shoreline.

An impressive physical architecture, possibly of a high cairn with a large internal area enclosed by multiple and multi-period stone kerbs, plank and pile palisades), possibly with a large house.

Dating, artefactual and stratigraphic evidence for prolonged occupation, occasionally exhibiting change or alteration across time (i.e. from sixth to eleventh century AD).

High-status objects, including imported pottery, glass, weaponry, horse fittings, valuable metalwork (silver, coins), high-status personal ornament (mounts, brooches, pins) and for on-site metalworking (crucibles, moulds, furnaces).

A nearby significant church or monastic site, a large ringfort and other early medieval sites and artefacts in the vicinity, with a possible association with a pagan Bronze Age or Iron Age archaeological site (burial mound, standing stone).

An early medieval historical reference (annalistic or hagiographical) to the residence of a king or political dynasty on the lake.

Interpreting crannogs as early medieval power centres

There are several early medieval crannogs in Westmeath that meet some of these criteria, whether in terms of their impressive architecture, rich artefactual assemblages, or their location at strategically or politically significant locations. However, the identification of an early medieval *royal site*, as opposed to a *lordly site* or site of high status, probably does require historical references to a king or political group residing there. In any case, there are at least two probable royal crannogs, Cróinis (Lough Ennell) and Coolure Demesne Demesne 1 (Lough Derravarragh) in Westmeath. It is likely that several other crannogs were also of high status, including Castle Island (Lough Lene), Dryderstown (Lough Annala), Clonickilvant (White Lough), Ballinderry crannog No. 1 (Ballinderry Lough) and Newtownlow. However, despite the presence there of either impressive architecture or high-status finds, they in no way match the previously named two sites.

Scenarios: Cróinis – early medieval royal crannog of the Clann Cholmáin

It is clear that the early medieval crannog at Cróinis, on Lough Ennell, is one of the historically attested royal residences of the Clann Cholmáin dynasty of the southern Uí Néill, who controlled the early medieval kingdom of Mide between the eighth and the eleventh century AD (see above for discussion of politics and peoples). The crannog of

Cróinis certainly has all that might be expected on an early medieval royal crannog. It is a massive cairn (50m diameter, 3-4m in height) of stone in deep water, inaccessible but in a highly visible location. There is archaeological evidence for building activity on the site in the mid-ninth century (c. AD 850), while its inner oak plank palisade was constructed in the early twelfth century (AD 1107 ± 9 years or later). Although the site has not been excavated, stray finds from its surface include bronze pins of eleventh to twelfth-century date were found on the crannogs. In historical terms, it is likely that the crannog was the residence of the Clann Cholmáin kings who controlled the midlands and plundered Viking Dublin on occasion. There were also several raids by rival dynasties on Lough Ennell and its environs throughout the tenth century (i.e. in AD 961, 985, 989, 991), all clearly aimed at the power centres of the Clann Cholmáin. It has also been shown that Máel Sechnaill maic Domnaill, then high-king of Ireland, died on Cróinis in AD 1022.

However, Cróinis is also situated in an interesting local early medieval settlement complex (Fig. 5.11). It is overlooked by Dún na Sciath, an impressive raised ringfort (a high level platform enclosed on its north side by a deep ditch and low external bank) on the nearby land. This ringfort is the historically attested Dún na Sciath ('fort of the shields'), which was also a royal residence of the Clann Cholmáin kings. Both ringfort and crannog were probably used for royal dwelling, public assemblies and other gatherings. There are other possible early medieval dwellings in the immediate vicinity, including a small, low-cairn crannog at Dysart 2), as well as three small low-cairn crannogs or platforms at Dysart 3, 4 and 5.

There is also a dense concentration of early medieval metalwork in the vicinity of the crannog, particularly of ninth and early tenth century silver. At least three hoards (Dysart hoards 1, 3, 4) of silver ingots, coins and other objects have been recovered from the eastern and western shores of Dysart Island (a large natural island to the north). The early tenth-century Dysart 4 hoard in particular was an enormous collection of silver ingots, ingot fragments, pieces of cut silver ornament, Kufic coins, and Northumbrian and East Anglian Viking coins, making it amongst the largest found in western Europe.¹³² It is likely that this silver was collected from Viking Dublin, possibly as loot after the sack of Dublin in AD 902. Smaller hoards of silver ingots have also been found on the eastern shore of the island, at Dysart 1 and 3, while a hoard of 3 ingots were found in 1966 on a small, rocky crannog at Dysart Island 1 (also known locally as

¹³² Ryan *et al*, 'Six silver finds of the Viking period from the vicinity of Lough Ennell', pp 339-56.

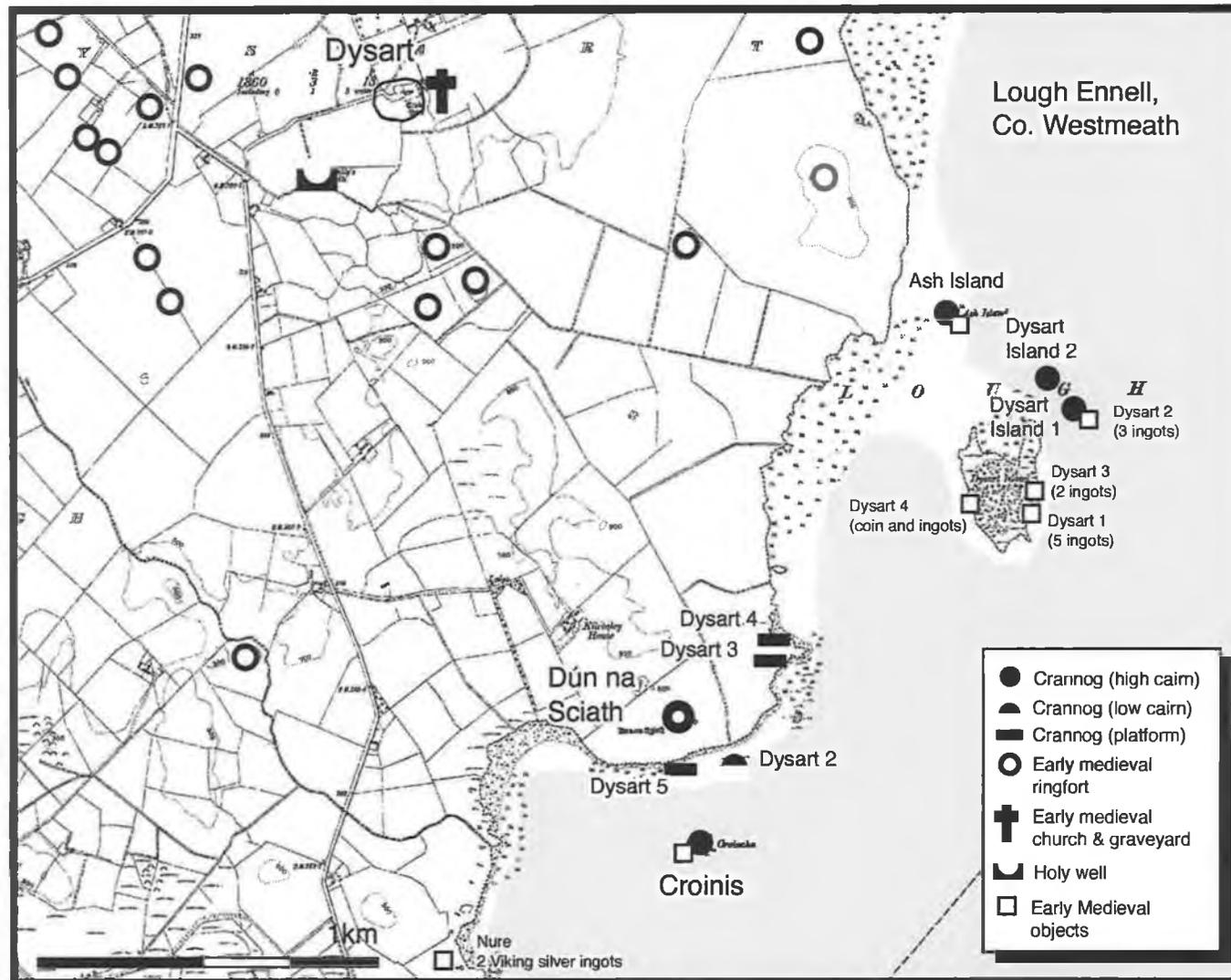


Fig. 5.11 Map of early medieval royal settlement complex at Dún na Sciath ringfort and Cróinis crannog, on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. These were the royal residences of the Clann Cholmáin kings of Mide between the eighth and the eleventh centuries AD.

Rocky Island). A hoard of silver ingots was also found on the lakeshore at Nure, to the west of Cróinis.

This silver could be actually indicative of a royal presence, as ingots are mentioned amongst the lists of tributes due to an overking from his subjects in the tenth-century *Book of Rights*.¹³³ Silver ingots were also apparently used to pay ransoms, as the *Annals of Ulster* state that the king of Brega was paid 60 ounces of gold and 60 ounces of silver to release Olaf, son of Sitric, king of Dublin in AD 1029.¹³⁴ However they were obtained, these hoards of early medieval ingots and coins scattered around the islands and the lakeshore at Dún na Sciath and Croinis indicate the political and economic influence of the Clann Cholmáin dynasty.

Cróinis is also strategically placed within the local early medieval settlement landscape. In regional political terms, it is probably on or near the borders between the early medieval territories of the Clann Cholmáin, the Cenél Fiachach and the Fir Tulach, although the latter two were probably sub-kingdoms or subjects of the former. In terms of the local settlement landscape, it is situated at some remove from neighbouring early medieval ringforts and churches. In Dysart townland, c.1.5km to the northwest, there is a surprising number (at least 10) of ringforts. These sites are typically quite small, univallate sites, suggesting that they were the residences of the king's clients and tenants. There is also an important early medieval church at Dysart, 2km to the north. It has a church (in ruins), a decorated cross base, a burial ground and a circular earthen enclosure.¹³⁵ The church is known in the early medieval sources as Dísert Máile Tuile. Máel Tuile was an eighth-century saint who was closely associated with Máel Ruain of Tallaght and his connection with him is a clear indication that this *dísert* by Lough Ennell was a Céili Dé church, of the reform movement that emerged in the eighth and ninth century.¹³⁶ Other possible early medieval sites include a holy well, earthworks and field-systems. Ash Island, to the north of Dysart Island, is also a probable early medieval crannog, as it has produced some early medieval objects.

This empty space between the dense concentration of early medieval sites at Dysart and the lakeshore royal settlement complex at Dún na Sciath/Cróinis may be socially and

¹³³ Charles Doherty, 'Exchange and trade in early medieval Ireland' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 110 (1980), pp 67-89, at p. 74.

¹³⁴ *A.U.* 1029.6.

¹³⁵ Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', p. 24.

ideologically significant. It is possible that this open ground was the *faithche* ('green', infield') or mensal lands of the king granted to him by nobles of the *túath* upon his accession to the throne. Early Irish literary sources mention a *faithche* at such royal sites at Tara, Navan and Crúachain as the location of public assemblies, the tribe's sacred tree, as well as being a location for cattle, tillage, horse-racing and ball-games.¹³⁷ It may also have been deliberately intended to maintain a social distance from the surrounding community. There may have been a customary exclusion zone between the king's royal residences and the other dwellings (in that ordinary people were not originally permitted to build dwelling enclosures close to the king's residence). It is also clear that Dún na Sciath and Cróinis are effectively located at the end of a promontory or ridge that is surrounded on two sides by fens and bogs, and to the south by the lake itself. The physical landscape itself could therefore be used to manipulate, enforce and control how people even approached the site.

Scenarios: Coolure Demesne – an early medieval royal crannog of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair?

Other early medieval royal crannogs can also be identified. Historical and archaeological evidence suggests that a previously unknown crannog at Coolure Demesne 1, Lough Derravarragh, is probably a royal residence of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair, whose territory lay along the northern shore of the lake.¹³⁸ These were a relatively obscure early medieval population group occupying the borderlands between the Clann Cholmáin kingdom of Mide and the Síl nÁedo Sláine kingdom of Brega. Unlike, the Clann Cholmáin, there are few historical references to them, so that interpretations of the site have to be based on archaeology. The crannog is one of the most physically impressive in Westmeath, with a massive cairn (36m diam., 5m in height) enclosed within a plank palisade and a roundwood post palisade. Although the site has not been excavated or scientifically dated, it was investigated by midland divers with metal detectors in the 1980s. There is rich artefactual evidence for activity on the site in the fifth to sixth century (an enamelled bronze mount, a hand-pin), through to the ninth and tenth century (in the form of bronze stick pins, ringed-pins, silver ingots and armllets, all probably imported from Viking Dublin).¹³⁹ Indeed, this metalwork raises questions about

¹³⁶ Edel Bhreathnach, 'A Midhe is maith da bhámar'. Thoughts on medieval Mide'.

¹³⁷ Fergus Kelly, *Early Irish farming* (Dublin, 1997), pp 369-70.

¹³⁸ Walsh, 'Meath in the Book of Rights', p. 15; Walsh, 'A fragment used by Keating', p. 8, note 39; Walsh, *Westmeath*, p. 373-4.

¹³⁹ Eamonn P. Kelly (Keeper of Antiquities, N.M.I.) describes the Coolure Demesne crannog as one of the richest archaeological sites in the midlands in terms of the recovery of artefacts ; E.P. Kelly, pers. comm.

its origins. Was it obtained by the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair from Hiberno-Norse Dublin themselves, using their own trading and political connections across the north midlands, or was it redistributed through the region by the Clann Cholmáin dynasty from their bases on Lough Ennell?

In any case, the Coolure Demesne crannog exhibits striking similarities with the Cróinis crannog in terms of its landscape setting (Fig. 5.12). It is located within a shallow bay or inlet at the north of the lake, partly enclosed by dryland to the north, east and west. Like Cróinis it is immediately overlooked by a prominent early medieval raised ringfort, situated at the edge of the lake. This raised ringfort has a central level platform, with a deep enclosing ditch and bank. It is evident that both the ringfort and crannog served as royal or high-status residences. As at Cróinis, there are also several small rock platforms and enhanced islets on the adjacent shoreline, possibly the temporary or seasonal dwellings of the king's retinue, or perhaps of his tenants.

Coolure Demesne is also strategically located in the early medieval settlement landscape. In regional political terms, it is probably on the borders between the early medieval territories of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair themselves and the Uí Maccu Uais Midi (Moygoish), the Corco Roíde (Corkaree) on the opposite shore, although all of them were minor sub-kingdoms within Mide. In the early medieval period, it may have also have been close to another boundary, that between the Clann Cholmáin controlled kingdoms of Mide and the Uí Néill kingdoms of south Tethbae (the territories of the Cairpre and Máine) which traditionally lay along the River Inny (which flows into and out of the lake).

In terms of the local settlement landscape, the crannog is also situated at some significant remove from neighbouring early medieval ringforts and churches. This appears to mirror the exclusion space found at Dún na Sciath/Cróinis. The nearest archaeological sites are five ringforts about 1km to the north, situated along the townland boundaries between Ballinealoe and Mayne. There is also a ringfort at Lispopple, slightly closer at hand 800m to northwest. This ringfort, now destroyed, was formerly situated on top of a local hill. The townland name (Lispopple) in which it is found is intriguing, possibly deriving from the Irish *Lios an phobail*, or 'fort of the gathering'. This might suggest a tradition of fairs, markets or assemblies in the locality, something potentially to be associated with early Irish kingship. Another interesting aspect of the siting of these ringforts is that they are located along a natural esker running NW-SE. This may have been the natural early medieval routeway through this

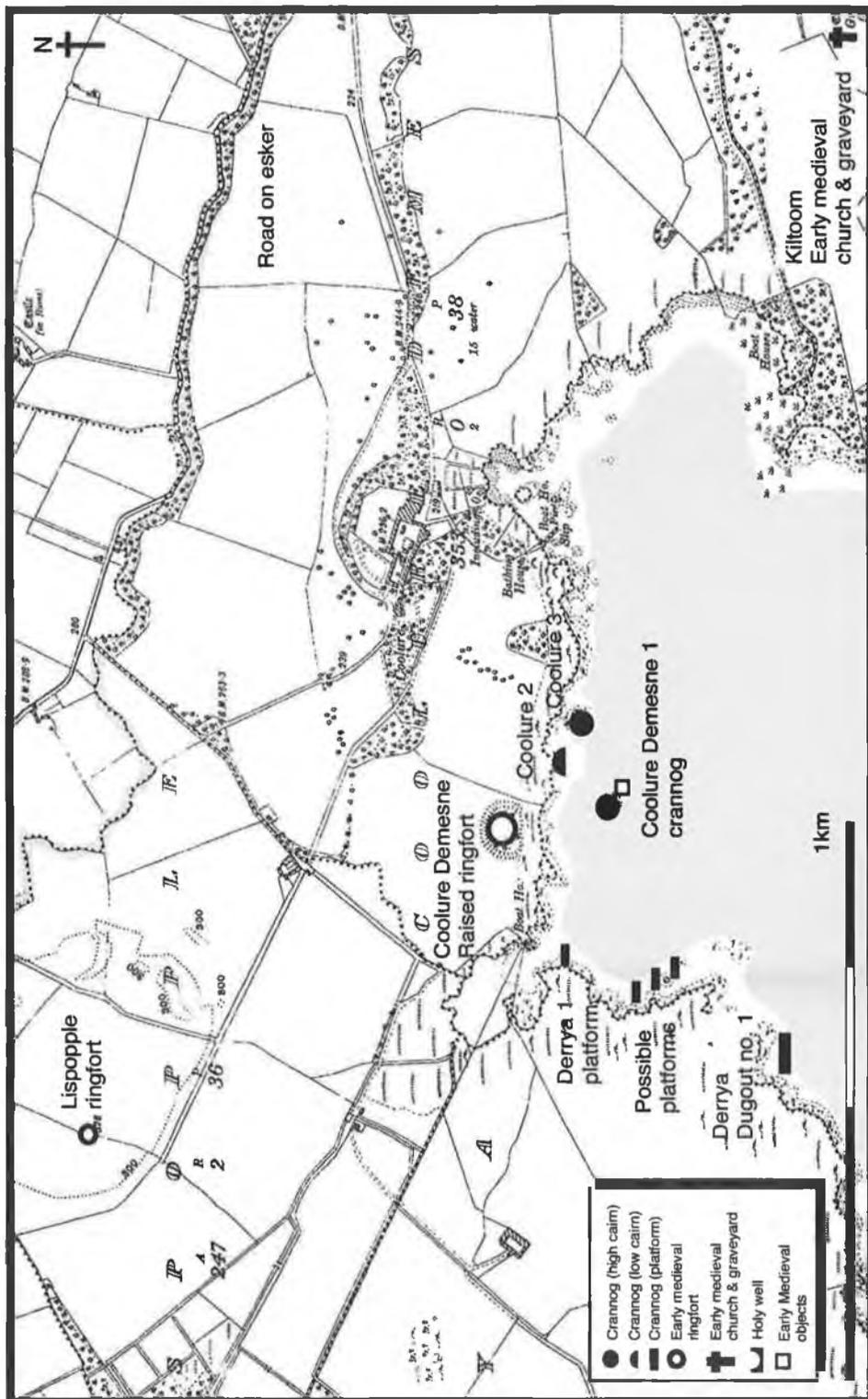


Fig. 5.12. Map of early medieval ringforts and crannogs at Coolure Demesne Lough Derravarragh. Archaeological and historical evidence suggests that this was a royal or lordly settlement complex of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair. The probable high-status crannog is situated in a small bay, overlooked by several other sites around the lakeshore, and could have served as an island 'stage' to symbolise the king's central role in the community.

occasionally boggy landscape (it carries a small, narrow winding road today). It is not unusual that the early medieval crannog and ringfort is away from this routeway, as Stout has suggested that early medieval royal sites occasionally appear to be slightly remote from roads, in contrast to ordinary ringforts and churches.

There are also several early medieval churches around Lough Derravarragh that could be potentially associated with the early medieval royal complex at Coolure Demesne, including a possible early medieval church at Mayne, 2.2km to the north. There is an early medieval church and graveyard site at Kiltoom, 1.5km to the east.¹⁴⁰ Kiltoom (*Cell Tóma*) is associated with the alleged sixth-century Saint Nennid (about whom little is known), and obits of its abbots are noted in the annals for AD 751, 768, 813, 851 and 886.¹⁴¹ It is likely then that the church at Kiltoom was occupied in the eighth and ninth century AD, possibly by an hereditary church family. Further down the shoreline, there is also an important early medieval church and graveyard at Faughalstown, reputedly founded by the sixth-century Saint Diermit, who himself was apparently of the Uí Fiachrach dynasty. This appears to suggest that that Faughalstown (*Fochlaid* in the early Irish sources) was a proprietary church of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair established by themselves (or by an ecclesiastical branch of them), while its eighth and ninth century abbots had links with Inis Clothrann on Lough Ree, at the western boundary of Mide.¹⁴² Faughalstown has a church (in ruins), burials and a broken cross-shaft within a rectilinear enclosure, while there is also a holy well dedicated to 'Saint Dermot' nearby.¹⁴³

Social continuity and change in landscapes of power

Recognising social change and evolving notions of kingship in the early medieval period, it is interesting to query continuity and change in the use of crannogs as royal sites. It is

¹⁴⁰ The site at Kiltoom may have had a significantly large enclosure, in part preserved by the modern field boundary; Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', p. 21; Rory Masterson, 'Some lesser-known ecclesiastical sites in Fore, Co. Westmeath' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 9, no. 4 (1998), pp 40-8, at pp 43-44.

¹⁴¹ The deaths of the abbots of Kiltoom (*Cell Tóma* or *Cell Tuama*) are mentioned in these annalistic entries; *A.U.* 751.4, 'death of Echaid of Cell Tóma'; *A.U.* 768.6, 'Coibdenach, abbot of Cell Tóma, rests'; *A.U.* 813.3 Cellach son of Echaid, superior of Cell Tuama, dies'; *A.U.* 851.1, 'Colgu, son of Cellach, superior of Cell Tuama .died'; *A.U.* 886.2, Robartach, son of Colcu, superior of Cell Tuama, fell asleep'.

¹⁴² Masterson, 'Some lesser-known ecclesiastical sites'. pp 44-5; The abbots of Faughalstown (*Fochlaid*) are mentioned in these annalistic entries; *A.U.* 785.4, 'Echaid son of Fócartach, abbot of Fochlaid and Inis Clothrann, dies'; *A.U.* 871.6, Cú Raí, son of aldria, of Inis Clothrann and of Fochla of Mide, a learned abbot and the most expert in the histories of the Irish, fell asleep in Christ'.

possible that the earliest crannogs at these sites, dating perhaps to the sixth or seventh centuries AD, were relatively small and perhaps partnered by a small ringfort on the shoreline. By the ninth century, they may have been larger cairns, potentially enclosed within outer wooden palisades that were both symbolic and defensive in intent. By the tenth or the eleventh century, they had probably reached their current appearance. This would have included a massive stony cairn, possibly enclosed within an oak plank palisade. The local ringfort may also have been deliberately enhanced or raised, thus creating a large raised ringfort. At this stage, it could be that these lordly sites were becoming the centres for population and settlement activity. There is no dating evidence for the small crannogs or rock platforms that surround the large crannogs, but it is possible that they were constructed and used towards the end of the early Middle Ages. Thus the social role of these settlement landscapes may have changed across the early medieval period, reflecting the changing nature of kingship or lordship after about AD 1000.

Islands, lordship, community and territorial defence

Introduction

However, there are also other early medieval crannogs in Westmeath that appear to be of high-social status, but not necessarily associated with royalty or kingship. Early medieval crannogs such as Goose Island (Lough Ennell), Dryderstown (Lough Annala), Castle Island (Lough Lene), Newtownlow, Knockaville (Lough-a-Trim), Clonickilvant (White Lough) are good examples. Although the absence of historical evidence is hardly conclusive, none of them appear to have been major centres of political power. Indeed, at both Goose Island and Dryderstown, it is apparent that these are not the royal sites of their territories, as these are elsewhere in the vicinity (Goose Island on Lough Ennell is situated to the north of Cherry Island, a probable royal site of the Fir Tulach, while Dryderstown on Lough Annalla is in a remote location to the southwest of Telach Cail, the royal site of the Uí Fhindalláin in Delbna).

However, the occupants of these crannogs were certainly wealthy and reasonably powerful. The crannogs are certainly impressively constructed high-cairn sites, but tend to be actually smaller (16-20m diam.) than the two royal sites discussed above, and they are enclosed within slighter wooden palisades. They produce some early medieval high-status metalwork (including ecclesiastical bells and basins), but not necessarily expensive or high-status items. They are built in a range of different locations, mostly quite

¹⁴³ Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', p. 21.

prominent and visible, while some are located on or close to barony (and thence possibly the *túath*) boundaries. These crannogs could reasonably be interpreted as high-status dwellings or strongholds, associated with significant members of the community, but not necessarily the most politically powerful. What role did they play in the early medieval landscape then?

Lordship and community in early medieval Ireland

In early medieval Irish society, much of the responsibility for protecting the *túath* and for carrying out hostings into rival territories lay with the various grades of lord. These social grades below the *rí túath*, basically comprised four divisions of *aire*, or lord, ranging in social status and responsibility.¹⁴⁴ In *Críth Gablach*, they included the *aire forgill* ('lord of superior testimony') and the *aire ard* ('high lord'), both of whom had military responsibilities within the community, defending the *túath* from attack from outside. Other lords included the *aire tuise* (lord of leadership) and the *aire déso* (lord), who probably farmed their own land. These lords depended for their social status on their ability to distribute fiefs of land, livestock, to hold free and base clients and thence should inevitably be wealthy in terms of land and livestock. Stout suggests that the two higher grades of lords could have owned between about 40-100ha of land and that some of this land would have been 'rented' to *ócaire* grade commoners, while their client *bóaire* farmers would have had their own land.¹⁴⁵ What was the lord's own ringfort like? Stout has suggested that the lord's ringfort would have been a prominent, probably bivallate or large univallate ringfort, located in an elevated or strategic location.¹⁴⁶ This would have been especially important for the lord who was expected to defend the *túath*.¹⁴⁷

In the case of the *aire forgill*, who was expected to maintain a pound for distrained livestock and to defend all parts of the *túath*, his ringfort would probably be centrally located at the heart of the territory. In contrast, the *aire déso* (the lord of lowest status) appears to have been expected to serve as a military leader in inter-territorial disputes and was expected to lead hostings into rival territories. He was 'a leader...who is left to do feats of arms in a [neighbouring territory] under treaty law...to avenge an offence against the honour of the *túath*'.¹⁴⁸ It might be expected that his ringfort or crannog

¹⁴⁴ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, p. 111; McLeod 'Interpreting early Irish law (part 1)', pp. 57-65.

¹⁴⁵ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, p. 112; Stout, 'Early Christian settlement, society and economy in Offaly', p. 81.

¹⁴⁶ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, p. 112.

¹⁴⁷ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, p. 123.

¹⁴⁸ MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish law', p. 297.

would be placed in a strategic location on the túath boundary, perhaps close to a routeway leading out of it. Stout suggests that the well-defended 'multi-functional' ringforts found in the southwest midlands, usually peripheral to territories and close to túath boundaries, were the residences of these lords with military responsibilities.¹⁴⁹

Obviously these lords also had significant social and economic ties with the various classes of free commoners. For the commoners (the *bóaire* and *ócaire* of the law tracts), access to land, buildings and farming equipment provided the wherewithal to be a farmer, although livestock would be rented from the lord. It seems likely that these farmers, with a household of men, women and children, usually worked their own land...perhaps in co-operation with others of the same social class.

Interpreting crannogs as lordly strongholds in early medieval Westmeath

Obviously the identification of one of Westmeath's crannogs as a lordly site is fraught with difficulties and liable to error. Nevertheless, it remains the case that not all high-status crannogs were royal sites, so that some interpretation or explanation is required of the role of these sites in the landscape. In this brief discussion, two case studies will be explored, that of the crannog as a lordly site centrally placed within a territory (Dryderstown, in the heart of the early medieval territory of the Delbna) and that of a lordly site on a *túath* boundary (Newtownlow, an early medieval crannog close to the boundary between the early medieval territories of the Cenél Fiachach and the Fir Tulach).

Scenarios: Dryderstown – a lordly crannog in early medieval Delbna?

It is probable that the early medieval crannog of Dryderstown, on Lough Annalla, is a high-status or lordly site within the territory of the Delbna Mór, who occupied the eastern part of Mide in the eighth and ninth century AD. Interestingly, although the crannog itself is relatively impressive (being a high cairn of stone and timber, 3.4m in height), it is not particularly large (c.16m diam.). The site is enclosed within a double wooden palisade (with an inner and outer concentric row). The site has also produced an array of early medieval artefacts, including pins, brooches, a mount, strap end, a harp tuning peg and a silver ingot. This latter object probably dates to the early tenth century AD, contemporary with much of the other Scandinavian silver in the midlands.

¹⁴⁹ Stout, 'Ringforts in the south-west midlands', p. 232.

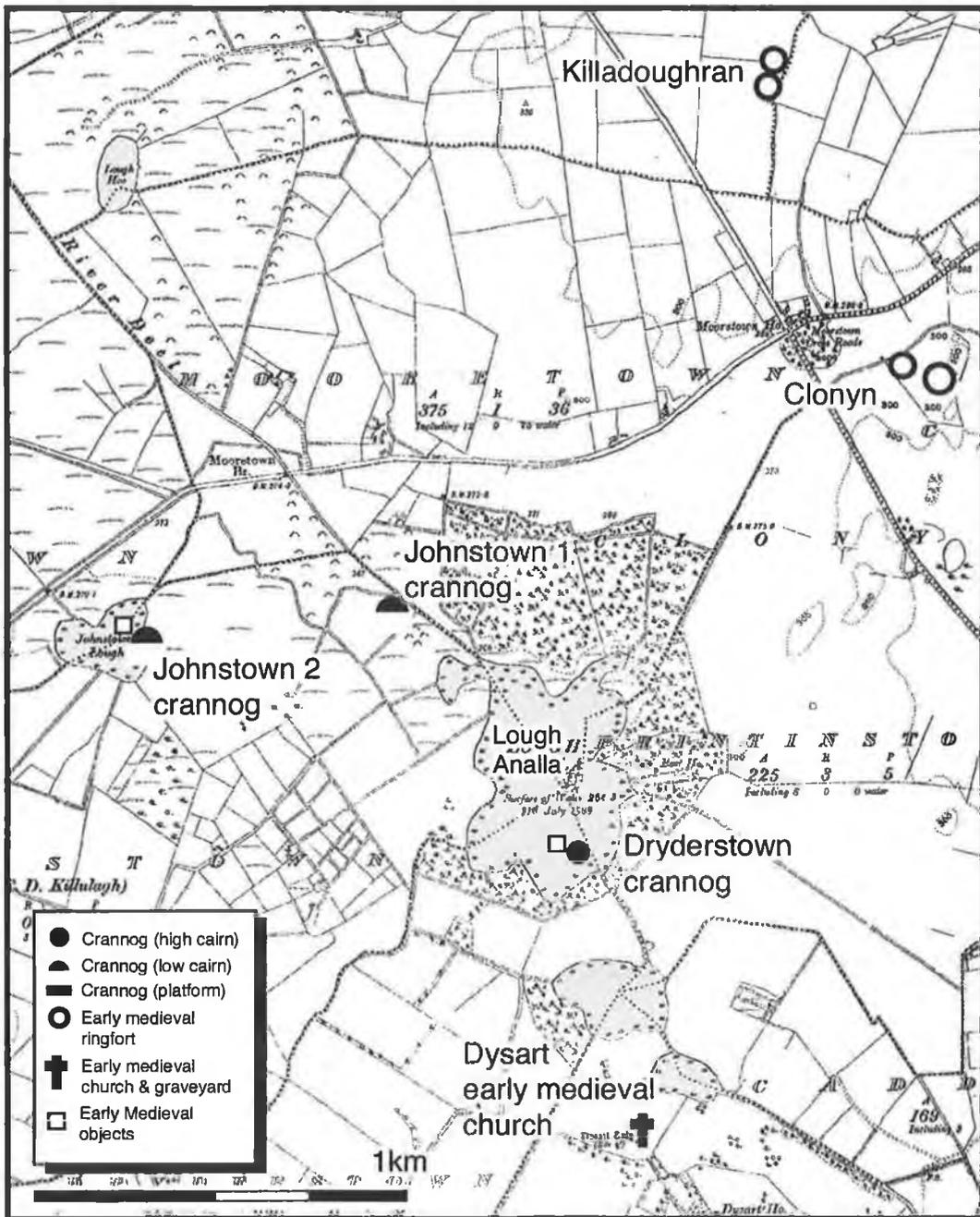


Fig. 5.13 Map illustrating landscape of early medieval crannog at Dryderstown, on Lough Analla, Co. Westmeath. The site is located 3km southwest of the early medieval royal site of the Uí Fhindalláin at Telach Cail (modern village of Delvin).

This is clearly an early medieval crannog and possibly a high-status site, but instead of thinking of it in terms of kingship, it is probably worth considering it as a lordly residence or a locally strategically stronghold. It is interesting then that the site appears to be quite isolated, remote from any other early medieval settlements (Fig. 5.13). There is a possible early medieval church and graveyard at Dysart Tola, c.600m to the south.¹⁵⁰ Otherwise, there are relatively few early medieval sites in the vicinity, including only two ringforts over a low hill at Clonyn, 1.2km to the northeast. However, if the crannog is isolated, it is situated close to a significant early medieval power centre. This is the early medieval royal site or *caput* of the Uí Fhindalláin, which was situated at Telach Cail (the modern Castletown Delvin). This is situated c.3km northeast of the crannog, across a rolling hilly landscape. The important early medieval routeway, the Slige Assail, also ran through this locality into northern Mide.¹⁵¹ It has already been stated that the *aire forgill* was expected to defend all parts of the túath, so that his residence would probably be centrally located close to or at the heart of the territory, potentially close to routeways. It is also possible that the crannog served as a refuge or isolated stronghold, intended to be occupied at times of danger.

Scenarios: Newtownlow – a lordly crannog in early medieval Fir Tulach?

Interestingly, other high-status crannogs are located close to significant routeways. This is particularly the case at Newtownlow crannog, which is situated beside an esker in a small lake in south Westmeath. The crannog was constructed of a mound of clay over a wooden foundation, enclosed within an oak plank palisade. It probably had a centrally placed large house that was destroyed by fire. The site produced evidence for occupation in terms of early medieval querns, wooden bucket staves, leather fragments, bone combs, an iron axe and a very large quantity of cattle, sheep, pig, goat bone, along with small quantities of horse, deer, hare and fox bone. The site also produced a significant hoard of Anglo-Saxon coins (dated to within the range AD 924-55), probably deposited on the site about AD 955.¹⁵² Other tenth century finds indicating a high social status included twenty bronze stick pins, a copper-alloy plaque with inlaid Irish Ringerike ornament and a whetstone with copper alloy attachments (possible a ceremonial sceptre). The Newtownlow crannog could probably be interpreted as a high-status or lordly site, occupied at least from the tenth century AD (and probably earlier).

¹⁵⁰ Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', p. 12 ; Flanagan, 'Anglo-Norman change and continuity: the castle of Telach Cail in Delbna', p. 388.

¹⁵¹ Colm Ó Lochlainn, 'Roadways in ancient Ireland' in J. Ryan (ed.), *Féilsgribhinn Eóin mhic Néill* (Dublin, 1940), pp 465-74.

An early medieval ringfort is situated close-by, at the west end of the lake. Although this is a univallate fort, it has an impressive bank and ditch enclosing a large internal area (c.45-50m diam.) This probably suggests a pairing between the ringfort and crannog, as is found with the previously discussed early medieval royal sites. It is evident that the crannog was not highly defensive, as it was located close to the shoreline and the lake itself could only have been shallow, hardly 1-2m in depth. However, the crannog is situated close to at least two major routeways. It is situated at the base of the slope of a steep-sided, sinuous esker ridge, immediately to the north. This esker is surmounted by a modern road, but it is evidently an ancient routeway (since replaced by the Dublin-Galway road some km to the south). The esker runs east-west for several kilometres through a hilly landscape, with extensive raised bogs to the north and low-lying lakes and fens to the south towards the Offaly border. To the west along the esker is the River Brosna, 2.2km to the west, which is navigable up to Lough Ennell (which is only 6km to the north) and to the south to the River Shannon.

In early medieval political terms, it is likely that the crannog was originally just within the territory of the Fir Tulach ('men of the hillocks), descendants of an earlier population group who had been demoted by the seventh century by the Clann Cholmáin.¹⁵³ In the tenth century AD, the territory of the Fir Tulach (the origins of the name of the modern barony of Fartullagh) lay on the east shore of Lough Ennell, and was enclosed on the other sides by raised bogs. According to the twelfth-century *Life* of Colmán maic Lúacháin, their stronghold or royal seat was at a place known as Dún na Cairge, probably an island cashel situated on the east side of Lough Ennell.¹⁵⁴ It is possible that Newtownlow crannog lay close to the southwest boundary of the early medieval kingdom. That it was of some political or territorial significance is probably confirmed by the presence of an impressive Anglo-Norman motte and masonry castle overlooking the crannog (300m to southeast), where there is also a medieval parish church. The motte was probably intended to appropriate the earlier power centre. In fact, the early medieval crannog appears to have been deliberately 'decommissioned' towards the end of its main occupation phase, as it was mantled under a deliberately laid, sterile layer of stones and clay. Thereafter, some people briefly active on the site deposited late-twelfth century green-glazed pottery, cast bronze objects and a jet cross

¹⁵² Kenny, 'A find of Anglo-Saxon pennies', pp 37-43.

¹⁵³ Newtownlow lies today within the barony of Moyashel, a short distance west of the boundary with the barony of Fartullagh. However, that it *originally* lay within the latter barony is indicated by the fact that the name of the local civil and medieval parish name of 'Newtown of Fartullagh', see K.W. Nicholls, 'The land of the Leinstermen' in *Peritia* 3 (1984), pp 535-8, at p. 555.

¹⁵⁴ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin*; Walsh, *Westmeath*, xxix; Smyth, *Celtic Leinster*, p. 85.

there. Indeed, this is an intriguing aspect of some abandoned early medieval Irish crannogs (e.g. Lough Faughan, Clea Lakes, Moynagh Lough, Ballinderry no. 1), where the presence of twelfth and thirteenth century finds suggests that they remained practically or symbolically important places to local communities (whether those people were of Gaelic Irish or Anglo-Norman ethnic stock).

In any case, it seems likely that Newtownlow was a strategically located and perhaps a significant lordly or high-status site, possibly situated at the southwest corner of the kingdom of Fir Tulach. It certainly would have been highly visible to travellers moving along the esker road, a well-known and distinct landmark in its little lake or pond. Its inhabitants and their followers would also have had rapid access to the road for the movement of troops, goods or animals (e.g. after a cattle raid).

Islands, social marginality and ‘living at the edge’

Introduction

In early medieval Ireland, most people would have been of the lower social classes. In the seventh and eighth century, these lower social classes included the ‘semi-freemen’ or ‘tenants-at-will’ (*fuidir*) and *bothach* (‘cottiers’, literally from *both*, ‘living in a hut’). These semi-freemen owned few material possessions, were tied to the land, and occupied a kind of servile tenancy, usually of the wealthy and powerful. They did whatever tasks their lord required, occasionally being granted livestock and land to be repaid by labour and produce.¹⁵⁵ Although early medieval sources are vague about servants and hired labourers, there may have occasionally been some people who did servile work for payment, including shepherds (*áugaire*), swineherds (*muccid*) and cowherders (*búachail*). Herdsmen were expected to protect livestock from wolves and raiders and were expected to spend their time with the animals, perhaps mostly out of doors. Other early Irish texts also associate a range of paid specialists that might be associated with a lord or king, such as the hunter, fisherman, trapper, fence-builder, as well as jesters, attendants, and so on.¹⁵⁶

It has also been explained above (Chapter 4) that slaves were an important aspect of early Irish society (in common with other early medieval European societies), between the fifth and the twelfth century AD. Slaves are often referred to anecdotally in laws,

¹⁵⁵ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 440-2; Charles-Edwards, *Early Irish and Welsh kinship*, pp 307-36; Brady, ‘Labor and agriculture in early medieval Ireland’, pp 128-9; Mytum, *Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp 135-6.

¹⁵⁶ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 442-5.

wisdom-texts, saint's lives and sagas, becoming slaves by birth, being captured in war (in Ireland or abroad in Britain), or by being sold into slavery during time of want. Most work in well-off households (lords in particular) was done by them, including herding cattle and sheep and heavy labouring work on the land. Male slaves (*mug*) were often associated with wood-cutting. Female slaves (*cumal*) were in contrast associated with the tasks of milking cattle, churning milk for cheeses and butter, sieving meal, grinding grain, kneading dough, and so on.¹⁵⁷

In the seventh and eighth century, these unfree classes were already growing, as previously free tenant farmers (such as those of the *ócaire* grade) or semi-freemen (the *fuidri*) descended down the social ladder through partile inheritance, debt or penury to become *sénchleithe*, hereditary serfs permanently bound to their lord and wholly dependant upon him.¹⁵⁸ By the tenth and eleventh century, the servile and dependant social classes were expanding, as part of the general 'feudalisation' of Irish society and the constant downward pressure on all social classes (from the *rí tíatha* downwards). By the twelfth century, the lower orders of unfree and semi-free were called by the general term *dímain* 'those of no property' and again these were the people who worked the land.¹⁵⁹

Identifying 'poor people's crannogs' in early medieval Westmeath

It is one thing to sketch out who the poor and unfree were, it is another thing to establish how they lived and where they lived. Most studies of early medieval settlement landscapes have tended to emphasise the dwellings of the upper social classes - kings (*rí*) and lords (*aire*), or at the least the independent land-owning farmers (the *bóaire*) or the small tenant farmer (the *ócaire*). The dwellings of the poor or dependant might be expected to be either on those high-status sites, situated close to them, or in the locations of people's daily work (i.e. near the fields and livestock). Early medieval houses have occasionally been found outside early medieval cashels, such as at Mooghaun fort, Clare.¹⁶⁰ Early medieval houses have also been found within field-systems (e.g. at The Spectacles, Co. Limerick), and the lack of personal wealth evident on these sites suggests that they may have been the dwellings of people who were living and working

¹⁵⁷ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 438-40; Charles-Edwards *Early Christian Ireland*, pp. 68-71.

¹⁵⁸ Brady, 'Labor and agriculture in early medieval Ireland', pp 129.

¹⁵⁹ Doherty, 'The Vikings in Ireland', p. 322.

¹⁶⁰ Eoin Grogan, pers. comm.

on their lord's estates.¹⁶¹ It is also possible that other places, such as woodlands or caves, may have been the residences of socially marginal groups.¹⁶²

In recent studies, there has also been a growing recognition that many crannogs were 'poor people's' dwellings, built, occupied and used by people with few material possessions. Of course, it is worth stating that most of the crannogs in early medieval Westmeath would have been the dwelling places, work-sites and venues for social relationships for poor and ordinary people. They lived close to and laboured for their lords, perhaps sleeping with the household on the crannog itself. Indeed, most physical labour on high-status early medieval crannogs like Cróinis or Newtownlow, would have been carried out by poor. In fact, the nobility were expected to avoid physical labour, as this being seen as demeaning and inappropriate behaviour. Thence, the building of these crannogs, the raising of the cairn, the hewing of the wood for the palisade and the movement of these raw materials around a lake would have been carried out by lower social classes, either clients providing labour services for their lord or dependent labourers simply working for their keep. Similarly, other labour within a crannog, including for example the grinding of grain with querns, or the preparation of food and milk products on high-status crannogs like Lagore or Moynagh Lough, would have been the work of semi-free women or female slaves (*cumal*).¹⁶³ Therefore, most of the quern stones, wooden buckets, tubs and churns that are found on high-status early medieval crannogs were once handled by poor people or slaves. In other words, instead of regarding the lower social classes as archaeologically invisible, it should be recognised that they are in plain view.

However, it is also true that some crannogs may have been the habitations or dwellings of the poor or the lower social classes. Fredengren's excavations at Sroove, Co. Sligo uncovered a small crannog, occupied between the eighth and the tenth century AD, which was probably occupied by people of low social status. The early medieval crannog at Sroove was a small, circular, low-cairn crannog (15m diam.) in shallow water, joined to the land by a stone causeway. It was re-occupied and re-used across time, gradually changing or shifting in function. Although a small, low-cairn of stone and wood, it was enclosed by a wooden palisade and in some phases had a house structure (with floor,

¹⁶¹ S.P. O'Riordáin, 'Lough Gur excavations: Carraig Aille and 'The Spectacles' in *R.I.A. Proc.*, 52C (1949), pp 39-111.

¹⁶² Marion Dowd, 'Archaeology of the subterranean world' in *Arch. Ire.*, 55 (2001), pp 24-9; Marion Dowd, 'Kilgreany, Co. Waterford: Biography of a cave' in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 11 (2002), pp 77-98, at p.87-8.

¹⁶³ Bitel, *Land of women*, pp 123-5; Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 448-51.

hearth and doorway) on its surface. The artefactual finds from the site were meagre in the extreme, including only a few bone pins, jet bracelets and flint artefacts. Nevertheless, they were clearly not destitute, as the site's occupants had access to meat, with abundant remains of cattle, sheep and pig bone scattered across the site. They also had access to cereal crops, as indicated by palaeoenvironmental studies.¹⁶⁴

There is some evidence for similar 'poor people's crannogs' in early medieval Westmeath. These crannogs are small, low-cairns, situated either in quite remote locations or in close proximity to larger, high-status sites. They produce a few early medieval finds, but little evidence for wealth or high-status activities. Obviously the identification and interpretation of these sites as 'poor people's crannogs' is a difficult task. In particular, in the absence of excavation it is difficult to establish their chronology and occupation histories. However, a number of possible early medieval small, low-cairn crannogs will be interpreted here in terms of their landscape settings, and will be discussed again below in terms of their architecture and morphology. At Kiltoom, on Lough Derravarragh, eight small, low-cairn crannogs are interpreted as seasonal, lakeshore dwellings, possibly occupied by labourers associated with the nearby early medieval church site. At Coolure Demesne on Lough Derravarragh, and Cróinis and Goose Island, Lough Ennell, there are groups of small, low-cairn crannogs and platforms that are suggested here to be the house platforms of tenants and serfs of the lordly crannogs out on the lake. Finally, it will also be suggested that a number of small crannogs around Westmeath may have been the dwellings of the poor or otherwise socially marginalised.

Scenarios: Coolure Demesne, Cróinis and Rochfort Demesne – living beside the lord's house

In the early medieval landscape, particularly towards the end of the period, some scholars have proposed that lordly dwellings would have become the focus for nucleated settlement, with serfs and tenants inhabiting the protected space around a raised ringfort or church. However, it is hitherto proven impossible to locate archaeological evidence for such nucleated settlement. It may be very significant then that some of the high-status early medieval crannogs in Westmeath, now known to have been used in the ninth and tenth century, seem to be surrounded by low-status crannogs. These latter sites are typically small (10-15m diam., 1m in height), cairns, often enhanced natural platforms or islets, situated down at the water's edge (rather than in open-water). They appear to

¹⁶⁴ Fredengren, *Crannogs*, pp 220-44; Fredengren, 'Poor people's crannogs', pp 24-5.

surround the high-status sites, occasionally clustering along shorelines to provide good views across to them.

Only one such small crannog or 'rock platform' has been excavated in Westmeath. This was a crannog or 'stone platform' at Robinstown, on the southeast shore of Lough Ennell, close to the early medieval cashel on Cherry Island.¹⁶⁵ The site was an ovoid cairn of stone (13m x 16m diam.), with a flat upper surface. Excavations revealed that it was built on a natural core of limestone drift, the glacial till of the region. A rough stone surface was laid across this, with larger stones forming a kerb or revetment around its perimeter. There was some evidence for small stone-built circular structures (5m and 3m in external diam.) in the centre, with a 'metalled surface' of large stones at the northern side (towards the lake), which merges into a rougher scattering of rounded stones at the southern edge of the site. Intriguingly, there was no evidence for occupation material, bone, artefacts of even charcoal (although this may have been eroded away by the lake).¹⁶⁶ In fact, although these small crannogs or 'stone platforms' will probably be impossible to date, the actual paucity of finds and their local landscape settings provide some clues. It is suggested here that some are indeed early medieval sites, probably occupied by people working on the lord's estates and perhaps really only used when the lord or king was present on his crannog.

At the early medieval crannog of Cróinis, Lough Ennell, there is at least one low-cairn crannog (Dysart 2) and three 'rock platforms' (Dysart 3-5) on the land beside the lake. The Dysart 2 crannog is quite similar in morphology, size and appearance to the early medieval crannog at Sroove, Co. Sligo. The other sites are lower in profile, barely enhanced natural mounds (indeed the presence of large glacial erratics on Dysart 5 suggests it was originally a geomorphological feature). At the early medieval crannog of Goose Island, in Rochfort Bay, on the opposite shore of the lake, there are also at least nine rock platforms scattered around the shoreline (Fig. 5.14). These small platforms certainly appear to be largely focused on the crannog out in the lake, which has produced radiocarbon dating evidence from the ninth century AD.

¹⁶⁵ These 'stone platforms' are also found elsewhere around the lough, usually in groups of 2-3 and typically associated with larger, early medieval crannogs.

¹⁶⁶ Niall Brady, 'Robinstown: stone platform', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1990* (Dublin, 1991), no. 119, p. 56; Niall Brady, 'Robinstown: stone platform', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1991* (Dublin, 1992), no. 129, p. 46; Niall Brady, 'Robinstown: stone platform', in I. Bennett (ed.), *Excavations 1992* (Dublin, 1993), no. 180; Niall Brady, pers. comm.



Fig. 5.14 Aerial photograph of early medieval crannog (ninth-century date from palisade) of Goose Island in its local landscape at Rochfort Demesne, on the east shore of Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath in 1968. The crannog is surrounded by several small low-cairn and platform crannogs all along this shoreline (Rochfort Demesne 1-9). These were probably the lake dwellings of ordinary or poor people living and working on their lord's estates (CUCAP AVH 13).

There is a similar phenomenon at the early medieval settlement complex of ringfort and crannog at Coolure Demesne, on Lough Derravarragh. The smaller crannogs around its bay include low-cairn crannogs (Coolure Demesne 2), a natural island (Coolure Demesne 3) and a rock platform (Derrya 1). There are also other natural geomorphological features on the west shore of the bay, apparently enhanced by scarping around their edges and attached to the shoreline by narrow stony pathways or causeways. These crannogs were evidently built on, enhanced and intended as some type of lakeshore activity sites. Their proximity to early medieval crannogs (with evidence for activity between the sixth and the eleventh century AD) suggests that they too are early medieval in date, although artefactual or radiocarbon dating evidence for this should now be sought.

What was the role of these smaller crannogs in these early medieval topographies of power? In the *Life* of Colmáin maic Lúacháin, there are various descriptions of the movement and taxation policies of the eleventh-century king of Mide, implying that as

the king travelled around on his royal circuit collecting taxes, food renders, tribute and troops for his retinue and hostings, he would stay at his residences, including his ringfort at Ruba Conaill and his crannog at Cróinis. Thus, the following two references

And neither the Uí Gusan nor the Uí Thigernan are obliged to provision the King of Meath in Cró-inis, but only in Ruba Conaill; nor yet should troops be billeted upon them in Cró-inis, except what .out from Ruba Conaill.¹⁶⁷

and

The king of Meath is not entitled to demand a troop from Fartullagh to accompany him on his round, except a lad for his horses, when he is in Cró-inis for the purpose of (collecting) the troop to accompany him; and they are not obliged to join a battalion on a day of battle, except with the king, and strangers and mercenaries.¹⁶⁸

A king moving around with his court would presumably be attended by a large number of people, including perhaps his queen and their family, his steward (*rechtaire*), judge, poets, bards and musicians, his smith, leeches, bodyguard, warrior retinue and favoured craftsmen, as well as any nobles or clients in attendance. No doubt, although not mentioned, there would also have been his own slaves and perhaps other dependent labourers. At both Cróinis and Coolure Demesne, it should be expected that these places would be a hive of activity at certain times of the year, and perhaps quieter at others. The royal crannog and ringfort were undoubtedly the abodes at these times of these various people, but it is also likely that others, particularly of the lower social classes would be there doing the invisible work that kept the court fed and watered, the wood-cutting for fires, the preparation and serving of food at feasts, the tending of the king's horses. At other high-status crannogs, such as Cherry Island (with its rock platforms at Robinstown) and Goose Island (with its rock platforms at Rochfort Demesne), it might also be expected that people would be living on the lakeshore at the time of the lord's presence on his island.

Recent studies of power in the Middle Ages have suggested that it is worth thinking about as something that moved in both directions, from the top-down and from the bottom-up.¹⁶⁹ Essentially, people of all social grades were actively involved in discourses of power, as people lived out their social roles and expressed them through dress, food,

¹⁶⁷ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*, § 62.

¹⁶⁸ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúachain*, § 101.

¹⁶⁹ Sally Foster, 'Before Alba: Pictish and Dál Riata power centres from the fifth to the late ninth centuries AD' in Sally Foster, Allan Macinnes and Ranald Macinnes (eds.), *Scottish power centres from the early Middle Ages to the twentieth century* (Glasgow, 1998), pp 1-31; Austin, 'The proper study of medieval archaeology', pp 9-35; Austin and Thomas, 'The proper study of medieval

labour and other performances. Intriguingly, what made a king's or lord's crannog significant were the *loyalty*, kinship and agreement offered by other social classes, including his clients, labourers and slaves. He was there to meet his subjects, to bestow gifts, to dispense justice and receive tribute, while also feasting on food offered by clients and subjects. In other words, what might have made Cróinis and Coolure significant was the presence of *other people* along the shoreline who contributed in some way to the life of the community at that particular place and time (by their labour, presence or approval). It might be suggested then that the 'poor people's crannogs' on the lakeshore served to create a theatre upon which power relationships were constructed, negotiated and even resisted. After all, if the king was present on his crannog and nobody knew, then what was the point?

Scenarios: Kiltoom, Lough Derravarragh – dwellings of serfs or dependant labourers?

There is also some evidence for possible early medieval lake shore dwellings occupied by people working on agricultural lands. It is possible to compare these with the early medieval crannog at Sroove, Co. Sligo, which was a small (15m diam.), low cairn of stones, originally located in shallow water (c.1m) with a stone causeway running to the land. A second, similar unexcavated site beside it was probably of the same date. Other low-cairn crannogs, of similar size, morphology and siting on Lough Gara have also produced either artefactual or scientific evidence for activity in the early Middle Ages. It is interesting then that quite similar crannogs are known from Westmeath, particularly at Cullenhugh, Lough Iron (one of which produced an early medieval buckle or mount, suggesting activity on the site in the period) and at Kiltoom, Lough Derravarragh (see Appendix 2).

At Kiltoom, on Lough Derravarragh, there are eight small, circular cairn of stones (11-15m in diameter, by 0.5-1.5m in height), situated on a straight length of shore, at measured intervals (c.50m apart) along the lake-edge (Fig. 5.15). The crannogs were originally located in very shallow water (50cm depth), about 10-15m from the original shoreline. There is no evidence for their date, occupation history or function. It is possible that they were first constructed or used in the Late Bronze Age, as there are local accounts of a Late Bronze Age sword being found on this foreshore in the 1960s, but there are no previously known finds from the crannogs themselves.¹⁷⁰ There are

archaeology: A case study', pp 43-76, at p. 75.

¹⁷⁰ In the A.S.I. Files: Westmeath: RMP WM 7-21, Kiltoom, there is an annotated 6" map of the sites, on which there is the pencil-written note, 'LBA sword found here', adjacent to a field drain leading into the lake. Although there is no reference to this object in the N.M.I. Top. Files for

also some later prehistoric archaeological sites in the vicinity, including a probable Middle to Late Bronze Age barrow and fulacht fiadh at Kiltoom, 1.1km to the northeast. However, it is more likely that these are early medieval sites, given their similarity with the Sroove and Cullenhugh crannogs, which have produced early medieval material. It may also be significant that the nearest archaeological site is an early medieval church and graveyard site at Kiltoom, 1.5km to the east.¹⁷¹ This site is located on rising ground that overlooks this part of the lake. The early medieval church of Kiltoom (*Cell Tóma*) was reputedly found by the sixth-century Saint Nennid and the deaths of its abbots are noted in the Annals of Ulster from the mid-eighth to the late ninth century AD (see above).¹⁷² It is clear then that this was a fairly significant church settlement, perhaps occupied between the sixth and the ninth century (after which it seems to drop out of the record). It may have been a local church devoted to the pastoral care of the early medieval communities living on the east shore of the lake.

The Kiltoom crannogs could be interpreted as the lake-edge dwellings of a small close-knit community, perhaps six or seven households or families. It is clear that these were not wealthy or powerful, although the crannogs are impressive constructions, defined by kerb walls and providing sufficient area for houses. The crannogs were situated in an interesting location, occupying a peripheral or marginal space along the shores of the lake, possibly at the edge of the agricultural lands of the church of Kiltoom and at some remove from early medieval ringforts and crannogs found elsewhere around the lake. It might be suggested that some measure of 'social distance' was achieved by this location, albeit not to the same degree as the early medieval crannog at Coolure Demesne to the north. On the other hand, these low crannogs would have been severely exposed to winter storms, as high waves are raised against this low-lying shore by the prevailing south-westerly winds on the lake. It is possible then that these were summer or seasonal dwellings, occupied by people inhabiting the lakeshore when cattle herds were grazing the low-lying meadows. It is also possible that these were people working the lands of *Cell Tóma*, which although hardly a powerful monastic site, was sufficiently important for its abbots to be noted in the annals. They may have been the residences of the church's dependant labourers, people who were responsible for work on its estates.

Kiltoom, Co. Westmeath, there is a Late Bronze Age sword currently in the private ownership of Thomas Pakenham, Tullyally Castle, Co. Westmeath. The author briefly handled this sword in August 2002 and noted that there were lake marls adhering to the handle. This might suggest that the sword was buried deep in the lake marls, thus pre-dating the crannog sites.

¹⁷¹ The church and graveyard is no longer extant, but field patterns indicate that it may have had a significantly large enclosing bank; Swan, 'Early Christian ecclesiastical sites of County Westmeath', p. 21; Rory Masterson, 'Some lesser-known ecclesiastical sites in Fore, Co. Westmeath', pp 43-44.

¹⁷² See discussion of Coolure Demesne 1 crannog above for these annalistic references.

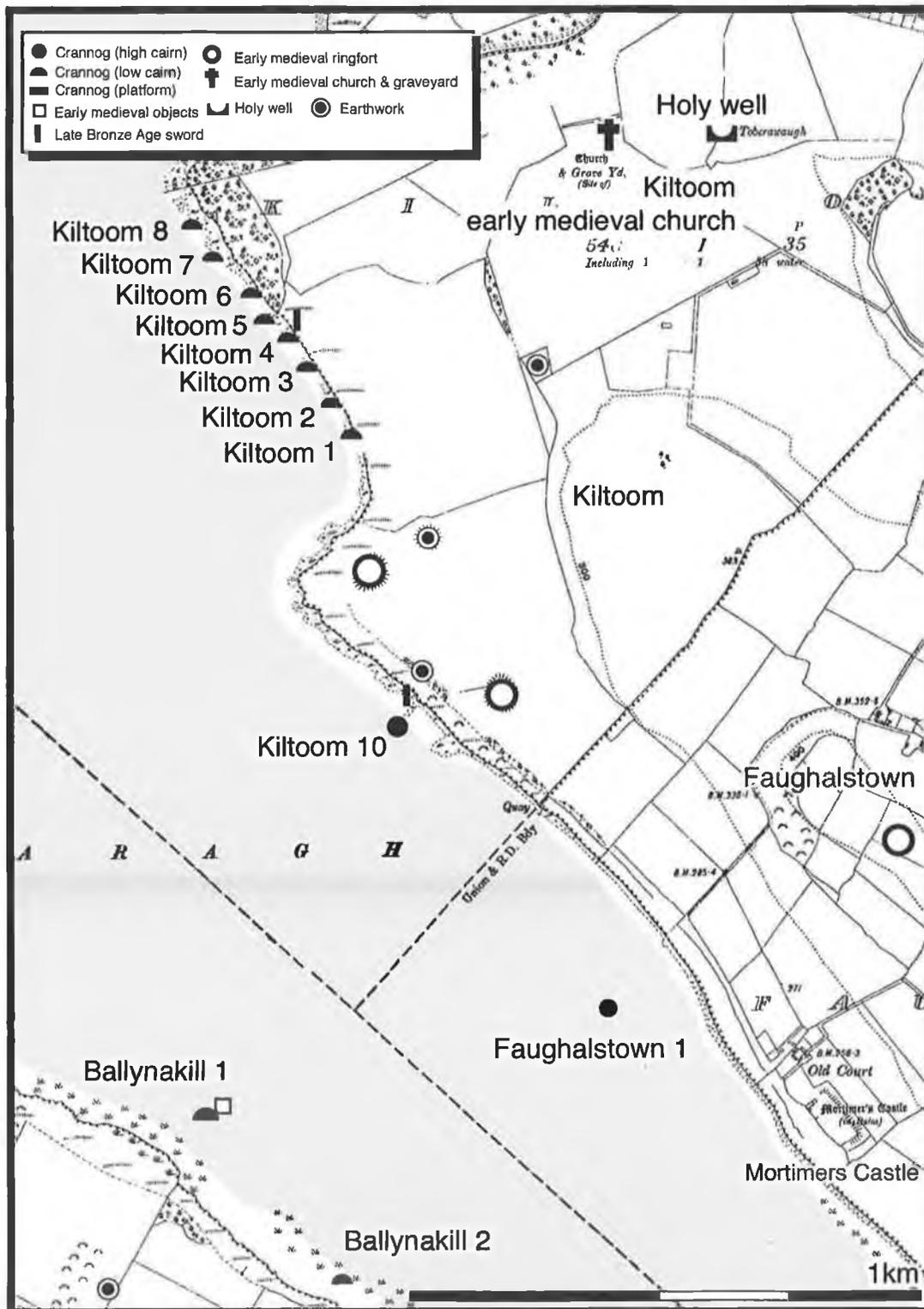


Fig. 5.15. Map of crannogs at Kiltoom (and also at Ballynakill and Faughalstown), Lough Derravarragh. The Kiltoom crannogs are situated on the shoreline to the west of an early medieval church (Cell Toma), possibly associated with the Ui Fiachrach Cúile Fobair. These small crannogs may have been the dwellings of monastic tenants or labourers.

However, it is also possible that these are the dwelling places of monks, as physical toil was not denied to those in religious life.¹⁷³

The poor, destitute and landless: living at the edge of society

There is also the possibility, difficult to prove, that some early medieval crannogs were occupied by people that were *really* living out at the margins of society. Early Irish monastic and secular educated classes ignored whole elements of their society, seeing the poor and landless as being of no interest. The early Irish laws regarded some of these as destitute or displaced people living at the margins of society. They include references to a type of wandering down-and-out known as the *sinnach brothlaig* ('fox of a cooking pit') as well as the *ríascaire* ('marsh dweller'). The *ríascaire* was despised as a wanderer and outlaw by both the tribe and the kindred and travelled 'from marsh to marsh or from mountain to mountain'.¹⁷⁴ Other references mention the *raitech* ('man of the road') a vagrant who travelled from place to place, exiled from his kin.¹⁷⁵ Some of these mysterious groups of wanderers inhabited marshes and wetlands, with these places themselves being seen as metaphors for people living out at the edge of the world.

It is likely that in early medieval Westmeath, there were places (particularly low-lying marshes, bogs and impenetrable woodlands) that were regarded as marginal, uninhabited wildernesses. It has already been mentioned that there is an account in the medieval Irish *Life of Ciarán of Clonmacnoise* to an incident where the saint intervenes to remove some troublesome people who were living on an island in a lake.

Now near Ísel there was a lake, and heathens and rabble were living in the island that was upon it. And the shouting and noise of that unprofitable folk used to disturb the clerics. Ciarán entreated the Lord that the island might be moved out of its place, and that thing was done; and still for remembrance of that miracle is seen the place wherein the island was in the lake.¹⁷⁶

I have suggested above (see Chapter 4) that the words *aes tuaithe 7 daescarslúag* (i.e. heathens and rabble) could be translated as 'country folk and servile people', although there are a range of potential meanings. In any case, it suggests that islands or crannogs could be seen as places for socially marginal groups, in this case, an island inhabited by poor people that were an irritation to the church authorities. There are some crannogs in Westmeath that could be interpreted as potential dwelling places for the poor, landless and destitute, largely because of their small size and remote location. A small crannog on

¹⁷³ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, p. 454.

¹⁷⁴ *C.I.H.* ii 585.27-9 = *A.L.* iv 354.7-10; Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, p. 425.

¹⁷⁵ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 423-6.

a marshy promontory at Johnstown Lough is a small (23.8m diam.), low mound of stone, earth and sand enclosed within a roundwood palisade. An early medieval bronze pin is said to have been found on the site.¹⁷⁷ The site is located in a lowlying marshy, boggy area, with small lakes interspersed amongst fens and peats. The nearest archaeological site (a ringfort at Clonyn) is some considerable distance (1.2km) to the east. Other, similarly isolated small sites include the possible crannogs at Clonsura (Lough Bane), Kilrush Lower (Newtown Lough), Johnstown, Culleenbeg (McEvoy's Lough) and Shinglis (Lough Sewdy) and possibly Twyford (Twy Lough). Having said that, at least one small, low palisaded crannogs is probably a Bronze Age site, this the crannog at Doonis Lough, in the callows of Lough Ree.

Islands, agriculture and working the land in early medieval Westmeath

Introduction

The early medieval Irish landscape, with its homesteads (ringforts and crannogs), field-systems and routeways, was primarily a sophisticated and highly organised agricultural landscape.¹⁷⁸ In this landscape, agricultural labour was a constant in people's daily lives. Most of the community, especially the ordinary and unfree members of society, such as the low-status commoners, hereditary serfs and slaves, would have spent most of their lives at work in the fields - herding cattle, sheep and pigs, ploughing, sowing and harvesting crops or building and repairing field-walls. In the homestead, the daily lives of men and women would also have been dominated by domestic activities relating to agriculture, whether this was in terms of preparing milk and cheeses, grinding grain for flour, smoking or salting meats and other foods for winter storage or spinning and weaving wool. However, agriculture was not only important in subsistence terms, it was also the key element in the organisation of early Irish society. Whether they were a lord or a slave, most people would have depended for their social status, subsistence and livelihood on agricultural labour on the land. Moreover, kinship and community, social

¹⁷⁶ Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, § 4327, p. 129.

¹⁷⁷ N.M.I. Top. Files, Johnstown, Co. Westmeath ; N.M.I. 1995:1586.

¹⁷⁸ For general discussions of the organisation of agriculture in the early medieval landscape, see Mitchell and Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape*, pp 283-88; Ryan, 'Furrows and browse: some archaeological thoughts on agriculture and population in early medieval Ireland', pp 30-6; Edwards, *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland*, pp 52-64; Mytum, *Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp 169-201; Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, 35-8; Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 398-431. A recent palynological perspective is also provided by D.A. Weir, 'A palynological study of landscape and agricultural development in County Louth from the second millennium BC to the first millennium

identity and gender relationships were all organised around the seasonal and daily rhythms of land-use and agricultural work.¹⁷⁹ For these reasons, agriculture and economy have to be seen as key aspects in the study of early medieval Irish society.

The role of crannogs in early medieval agriculture and economy

Early medieval crannogs have provided a range of evidence for the character of early Irish farming. Cattle herding and pastoral farming were both clearly of great social and economic importance in the early medieval landscape. They formed the primary basis for the ordering of social status, for the enactment of socio-economic relationships and the evaluation of land, while the herding, maintenance and care of cattle was also a significant aspect of age and gender relationships.¹⁸⁰ Indeed, the early Irish sources also testify to the popularity of milk, butter, cheeses and other dairy products.¹⁸¹ The large quantities of cattle bone and dairying equipment (e.g. buckets, drinking vessels, etc) recovered from early medieval crannogs certainly suggest that they played some significant role in the agricultural landscape.¹⁸² McCormick has examined the faunal assemblages from the early medieval Lagore and Moynagh Lough crannogs and has shown that dairying was of prime importance from the sixth century, as young male calves were slaughtered to maintain the age and sex profile of the dairy herd.¹⁸³ In Early Medieval Westmeath, there is also good evidence for middens of animal bone from crannogs (e.g. Newtownlow, Ballinderry No. 1, Cróinis, Coolure Demesne, Ballynakill 1). In particular, there were large amounts of cattle, sheep, pig bone, as well as amounts of horse, red-deer, hare and fox from the early medieval (i.e. tenth-century) crannog at Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath.

In the early Middle Ages, cattle were grazed outside throughout the year, with pastures carefully maintained for the winter by fences and local transhumance in the summer. The early medieval Irish did not save hay, but preserved grass on the ground for grazing during the winter, by removing cattle from the vicinity of settlements during the summer (often by going to upland grazing areas for the summer months). Indeed, lakeshore water-meadows and callows would have provided excellent grazing in the

AD', in *Discovery Programme Reports 2* (Dublin, 1995), pp 77-126.

¹⁷⁹ Kelly, *early Irish farming*, pp 448-52.

¹⁸⁰ Mitchell and Ryan, *Reading the Irish landscape*, pp 283-88; A.T. Lucas, *Cattle in ancient Ireland* (Kilkenny, 1989); Patterson, *Cattle lords and clansmen*.

¹⁸¹ Ó Corráin, *Ireland before the Normans*, pp 55-6;

¹⁸² O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 143-45.

¹⁸³ Finbar McCormick, 'Stockrearing in Early Christian Ireland'. Unpublished PhD thesis, (Queen's University, Belfast, 1987), section 3.2; McCormick, 'Dairying and beef production in Early Christian Ireland, the faunal evidence', pp 253-267; Finbar McCormick, 'Cows, ringforts and the origin of

summer and autumn, so that in the midlands the early medieval practice of transhumance or booleying may not have been carried out in far-off uplands, but in nearby lowlying wetlands (which would perhaps be flooded during the wintertime). Although it would have been impossible to house cattle upon crannogs themselves, it is possible that some of the crannogs may still have been positioned at particular parts of lakes to control prime pasture along the lakeshore. It is also possible that some of the ringforts found along lakeshores may not have been settlements but byres and corrals for the protection of the cattle (from wolves and cattle raids).¹⁸⁴

Sheep and pig were also an important aspect of stock-raising on crannogs, however the large assemblages of cattle bone on crannogs may be misrepresentative due to past sampling techniques and the fact that cattle produce more bones than smaller animals. At Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, although cattle predominated slightly, there were also large numbers of pig and sheep/goat. Pigs were kept for pork, bacon, puddings and sausages.¹⁸⁵ Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Offaly produced an amount of young pigs.¹⁸⁶ Small wicker structures have commonly been found on crannogs, these may have been occasional pigpens for young animals. Otherwise pig-herds could have been let free in the woodlands around the lakes. Sheep were kept for their wool, meat, milk and skins, while goats may also have been occasionally kept on crannogs. Horses may have occasionally been eaten, but the presence of horse bits at Ballinderry crannog No. 1 and Lagore and the large amount of weaponry at Lagore may suggest their use in hunting and warfare. Chickens may have been kept on some crannogs, as both Lagore and Lough Faughan produced the bones from domestic fowl, though the presence of particularly large bird bones with well developed spurs may indicate the practice of cock-fighting.¹⁸⁷

There are also indications that arable farming and tillage were an important element in the farming landscapes around early medieval crannogs, with cereals such as wheat, barley, oats and rye, as well as such vegetables as onions, leeks, celery, kale and peas all grown.¹⁸⁸ It is thought that wheat and rye were high-status foods, while oats and barley

Early Christian Ireland' in *Emania* 13, (1995), pp 33-37.

¹⁸⁴ A possibility previously suggested by many archaeologists, including McCormick, 'Cows, ringforts and the origin of Early Christian Ireland', pp 34; perhaps also being confirmed by the amount of recent early medieval ringforts excavations that have produced no internal evidence for houses or occupation.

¹⁸⁵ McCormick, 'Interim report on the animal bones from Moynagh Lough', pp 86-90.

¹⁸⁶ It is also possible that these pig bones relates to high-status feasting; Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 2'; Newman, 'Ballinderry crannóg No. 2, Co. Offaly: Pre-crannóg early medieval horizon', pp 99-124.

¹⁸⁷ Hencken, 'Lagore', pp 229.

¹⁸⁸ Edwards, *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland*, p. 62;

were more associated with poor people's diets, although archaeology suggests that other factors such as soil suitability, climate and uses of grain for malting may be a stronger influence on the growing of different crops.¹⁸⁹ Arable farming would have entailed the ploughing of lands, the sowing and harvesting of arable crops and the storage of grain and flour within barns and dwellings, all activities mentioned in the early Irish law texts and hagiographies.

It is interesting that plough irons (including both sixth to twelfth-century plough shares and tenth to twelfth-century coulter), have been found on several crannogs, such as Rathinaun, Co. Sligo, Lagore, Co. Meath, Ballinderry crannog No. 1, Co. Westmeath, Tonymore, Lough Kinale, Co. Longford as well as a crannog on Lough Meelagh, Co. Roscommon.¹⁹⁰ Reaping hooks or sickles and billhooks have also been found at Lagore.¹⁹¹ A wooden separate-bladed shovel is known from Moynagh Lough,¹⁹² while a possible iron spade-tip from a wooden spade was found at Ballinderry crannog No. 2.¹⁹³ The holding of these objects on crannogs (where, obviously they could not have been used) is potentially intriguing, as the ownership and use of a plough in particular would have been a mark of status, while ploughing itself was often a co-operative venture. It possibly indicates that such objects were hoarded or 'kept' on crannogs when not in use.

Although, there have been few palaeoecological studies from the waterlogged deposits of crannogs to assess the presence of cereal foods, recent studies indicate the presence of barley and oats on an early medieval crannog at Ballywillin on Lough Kinale (where it was possibly being processed).¹⁹⁴ Deposits of carbonised oats and barley were also found at Lough Faughan, Co. Down, suggesting that they were stored on the crannog and burnt by accidental fire.¹⁹⁵ Wheaten straw (*triticum* spp.) was found in a mass of organic debris in Period 1a at Lagore, where it was possibly used for flooring or even human or animal bedding.¹⁹⁶ Stone rotary querns, whole and fragmentary, are a common find on excavated crannogs, no doubt used for grinding flour for baking bread and the

¹⁸⁹ Regina Sexton, 'Porridges, gruels and breads: The cereal foodstuffs of early medieval Ireland' in Monk and Sheehan (eds.), *Early Medieval Munster*, pp 76-86; Margaret McCarthy, 'Archaeobotanical studies and early medieval Munster' in Monk and Sheehan (eds.), *Early Medieval Munster*, pp 65-75.

¹⁹⁰ Niall Brady, 'Reconstructing a Medieval Irish plough' in *I Jornadas Internacionales sobre tecnologia agraria tradicional*, (Madrid, 1993), pp 31-44; Kieran O'Connor pers. comm.

¹⁹¹ Hencken, 'Lagore crannog', p. 105.

¹⁹² John Bradley, 'A separate-bladed shovel from Moynagh Lough, County Meath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 112 (1982), pp 117-22.

¹⁹³ Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 2', p. 48, Fig. 2:402.

¹⁹⁴ Tony Brown, pers. comm.

¹⁹⁵ M.E.S. Morrison, 'Carbonised grain from Lough Faughan crannog', in Collins, 'Lough Faughan crannog', pp 75-6.

preparation of gruels and porridges. The overwhelming occurrence of only broken fragments of querns hints at their deliberate destruction and abandonment for some symbolic or social reason, a topic to which I will return again. Interestingly, although quern stones are a relatively common find on crannogs in the northwest, few quern stones were recovered from crannogs in Westmeath.

It is evident that despite their location in wetland environments, crannog-dwellers made little or no use of the rich, bountiful harvests of the surrounding wetlands, such as berries, nuts and plant-foods. Red deer bone is fairly uncommon on excavated sites and may have been hunted for sport. Indeed, at the sixth-century pre-crannog occupation phase at Ballinderry No. 2, the large amounts of red deer bone may represent high-status or even aristocratic deer-hunting activities along the lakeshore. Bird bones are slightly more plentiful on early medieval crannogs, suggesting at least some wildfowling on lakes and their margins. Lagore crannog in particular produced a large amount of bird bone, including wild goose, wild duck, raven, swan, great-crested grebe, coot, moorhen and corncrake. Wild geese and wild duck were the most common, indicating that the crannog-dwellers were expert fowlers.¹⁹⁷ Similarly, there is little archaeological evidence for the consumption of fish (and thence the catching of fish in lakewaters) on crannogs, although there is plenty of historical and archaeological evidence for riverine and coastal fisheries in early medieval Ireland.¹⁹⁸

Crannogs, agriculture and the land in early medieval Westmeath

Introduction

What was the role of crannogs in agricultural landscapes of early medieval Westmeath? There is a range of potential ways of exploring this topic. In recent years, landscape studies of crannogs in Scotland have tended to try and establish their role in agricultural economy by assessing their relative proximity to good agricultural land (i.e. adjudged by the quality of adjacent soils, slope aspect and gradient and local drainage).¹⁹⁹ Dixon's underwater surveys on Lough Tay noted that the positions of crannogs there corresponded to areas of lesser slope and land suitable for cultivation.²⁰⁰ Similarly, Morrison observed that 'seventeen of the twenty built-up islets in Loch Awe can be said

¹⁹⁶ Hencken, 'Lagore crannog', p 242.

¹⁹⁷ Hencken, 'Lagore crannog', pp 229-30.

¹⁹⁸ O'Sullivan, *Foragers, farmers and fishers in a coastal landscape*, pp 135-91.

¹⁹⁹ Ian Morrison, *Landscape with lake dwellings* (Edinburgh, 1985), pp 58-80; J.C. Henderson, 'A survey of crannogs in the Lake of Menteith, Stirlingshire' in *S.A.S. Proc.*, 128 (1998), pp 273-92; Holley, *The artificial islets/crannogs of the central Inner Hebrides*, pp 68-98.

²⁰⁰ T.N. Dixon, 'A survey of crannogs in Lough Tay' in *S.A.S. Proc.*, 112 (1982), pp 17-38.

to lie immediately adjacent to patches of land of arable potential'.²⁰¹ Henderson in his survey of the Lake of Menteith in the Scottish lowlands also concluded that land unsuitable for cultivation tended to be crannog free, while good land was more likely to have crannogs offshore.²⁰² Holley, in attempting to quantify these relationships more closely carried out quite detailed statistical studies of crannogs in the Inner Hebrides, only to simply confirm that crannogs were indeed typically closer to good soils, at low altitudes, and relatively sheltered from waves and winds.²⁰³

Islands, landscape and agriculture in Westmeath

In Westmeath, it is evident that broadly similar patterns of location in terms of agricultural landscapes can be traced.²⁰⁴ In general, the county's crannogs tend to be associated with good agricultural land, suitable for both arable farming and grazing. Notwithstanding this, crannogs are of course wetland sites, so they tend to be found in low-lying, waterlogged areas, adjacent to lake marshes, fens and raised bogs, although the nearby dryland slopes tend to be of grey brown podzolic soils. However, there are some crannogs that are deliberately sited in isolated wetland landscapes.

Indeed, the siting of crannogs beside raised bogs is certainly common in Westmeath. The crannogs of Ballinderry No. 1, Knockaville (Lough-a-Trim), Clonickilvant (White Lough), Donore 1 (Lough Derravarragh), Clonsura (Lough Bane) and School Boy Island, Rushy Island and Bog Island (all 3 on Lough Ennell) are all located immediately adjacent to raised bogs or fens. It is possible that this relates to the role of these bogs as significant political or territorial boundaries, as bogs were probably not being exploited for agricultural or economic reasons (although recent studies in Leamanaghan, Co. Offaly, suggest the use of bogs for iron ores). Perhaps also pertinent is their proximity to major rivers, particularly in the case of Donore 1 and Clonsura (River Inny), School Boy Island, Rushy Island and Bog Island (by the River Inny, on Lough Ennell). This suggests that some sites were not farmsteads situated adjacent to agricultural land, but were defensive refuges, fortified islands aggressively situated on political boundaries or islets placed to watch or monitor travel on riverine routeways.

²⁰¹ Morrison, *Landscape with lake dwellings*, p. 74.

²⁰² Henderson, 'Lake of Menteith', p. 286.

²⁰³ Holley, *The artificial islets*, p. 98.

²⁰⁴ It would be normal practice here to prepare detailed histograms and site catchment analyses maps of crannogs in Westmeath, showing their relationships with soils, drainage and land-use capabilities. In fact, the overwhelming prevalence of good quality, grey brown podzolic soils across the county would make this a slightly pointless task. Here I will confine myself to some more qualitative and interpretative comments instead.

However, in general, even where crannogs are locally sited in waterlogged environments, the nearest agricultural land tends to be of high quality. On Lough Ennell, most of the lake's twenty-two crannogs are situated along shorelines of grey brown podzolic soils (Patrickswell series). Indeed, around Cróinis, on the western shore, the crannogs huddle around a narrow promontory of grey brown podzolic soils, surrounded to the north and south by lake alluviums (Coolalough series). On Lough Derravarragh, most of the lake's crannogs are adjacent to good quality soils. Elsewhere around the county, rather similar patterns emerge. The nearest *cultivable* soils to the crannogs of Ballinderry no. 1, Twyford, Shinglis, Cullenhugh, Knockaville, Clonickilvant, Dryderstown, Castle Island, Nun's island, Clonsura and Derrynagarragh are grey brown podzolics whether they be of Patrickswell or Rathowen series.²⁰⁵ Other crannogs, such as Newtownlow and Loughan are located adjacent to similar soil mineral complexes, based either on esker ridges or other glacially derived till.

Islands, landscape and agriculture on Lough Derravarragh

In terms of local landscapes, there is also good evidence for the choice of location of crannogs in relation to agricultural exploitation around Lough Derravarragh. It is evident that the lake's eighteen crannogs typically avoid those parts of the lakeshore where there are low quality, inaccessible or difficult to work agricultural soils. There are no crannogs adjacent to raised bogs, apart from the crannog off Donore townland, which is actually directly off a dryland shore. This crannog (Donore 1) is overlooked by bogs to the north, west and southwest, with the only good agricultural land at least 250m to the southeast. Interestingly, the Donore 1 crannog may have been linked across the lake to Clonava by a wooden causeway, which would also have blocked the navigable routeway of the River Inny.

There is only one crannog off Derrya townland, which is an 'island' of heavy, wet gley soils (Street soil series, over a shale and limestone till) surrounded by raised bog and lake water.²⁰⁶ This would have been poor agricultural land, prone to poaching and damage by cattle, because of its poor drainage. The lake's crannogs also avoid the other 'island' at the north end of the lake at Clonava, which has grey brown podzolic soils over a limestone shale and till. Although this would have been relatively good agricultural land,

²⁰⁵ Finch, *Soils of Co. Westmeath*, 'Soil Map of Co. Westmeath and 'Suitability map for cultivation and grassland'.

²⁰⁶ Finch, *Soils of Co. Westmeath*, pp. 40-4, 'Suitability map for cultivation and grassland', classifies the 'island' of Derrya as Grassland grade D, and Cultivation grade 1V, making it amongst the poorest soils in the county because of its wetness, and only just worse than raised bogs in terms of its grazing capacity.

it would have been quite inaccessible (as it was cut off by riverine marshes, fens and bogs). The lake's crannogs also generally avoid the southeast end of the lake, where there are very steep, heavily wooded slopes today, with rock outcrops. Only at Monintown, at the south end, is there a single crannog that is overlooked by imposing, steep slopes of Knockbrody. This is an enigmatically isolated site, located at the base of a steep slope, but there are few ringforts in the area, suggesting that the site was relatively isolated in the past too. In other words, the crannogs generally avoid both the steep hills at the southern end of the lake as well as the lowlying fens, bogs and riverine marshes at the north end.

In fact, it is clear that the Lough Derravarragh crannogs tend to be found adjacent to grey brown podzolic soils, on well-drained, level or gently sloping land with a good southern aspect (which warms the soils and increases their productivity). This is particularly evident in the dense concentrations of crannogs at Coolure Demesne and at Kiltoom townlands, at the north and northeast end of the lake. At Coolure Demesne, the crannogs are adjacent to excellent agricultural land, used today for cattle pasture and woodlands. Similarly, the crannogs of Kiltoom are adjacent to gently sloping, good quality land warmed by its southern aspect, used today for cattle and sheep pasture. Indeed, during the summer the livestock are moved down to the lakeshore so that they can graze the lakeshore's water meadows.²⁰⁷

Living by lakeshores and the routines of agricultural labour

In exploring the role of crannogs in the agricultural landscape, it is important to recognise that farming in early medieval Ireland was essentially based on social relationships, specifically those of social status clientship. Merely because a crannog was close to good agricultural land, with good soils, drainage and aspect does not mean that its inhabitants were the ones to work the land. In fact, that is one of the major criticisms to make of Scottish crannog research, the idea that simple land-use models can be established from spatial proximity. For example, the early medieval crannog at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath has produced good evidence for dairying and the consumption of meat, but almost certainly the high-status inhabitants of the island were not themselves involved in agricultural labour, but were being provisioned by others, as food was brought in for feasts as render and tribute. Indeed, in this case, the siting of the Moynagh Lough crannog itself in relation to good land is almost irrelevant. What is

²⁰⁷ Finch, *Soils of Co. Westmeath*, pp. 46-50, 'Grazing capacity of Soil Series' map, classifies this land as the best quality pasture in the county, potentially supporting 85-90 livestock units (defined as a 10.5cwt cow or equivalent). per 100 acres.

more important is the distribution and location of the ringforts around its lakeshore, the places wherein dwelled the people who worked their lord's estates. Indeed, at Moynagh Lough, there are several small univallate ringforts along the lake's edge and these may well have been the dwellings of *ócaire* grade farmers who worked as tenants of their lord, who himself lived on the island. There are also larger ringforts on the brow of the ridge overlooking the lake, including an impressive raised rath and a large bivallate ringfort, both presumably residences of wealthier households or communities, who perhaps also held lands around the lakeshore.

In early medieval Westmeath, it is also possible to suggest ways in which agricultural lands were being organised and worked. At Coolure and Cróinis crannogs, it is likely that the large extent of open land that surrounds them, defining a space around these high-status sites, were actually royal demesnes, granted to the king upon his accession, and used to maintain his own court and retinue. In some of the sources, this is referred to as the king's *faithche*, a place adjacent to the royal residence which appears to have an open 'green', being the venue for sports, horse-racing and other activities. On other lordly or high-status crannogs like Newtownlow, Ballinderry No. 1, Clonickilvant and Knockaville (Lough-a-Trim), or the islands of Goose Island or Cherry Island, on Lough Ennell, it is likely that the lands along the lakeshore were also agricultural estates, most probably worked by the lord's clients on occasion, and normally by his dependant labourers and slaves. It is likely that the agricultural estates around the lakes were organised on an 'infield' and 'outfield' basis, like much of the early medieval landscape, with field-systems, lanes or pathways and other features along the lakeshore. Geophysical survey along the lakeshores (particularly on Lough Derravarragh and Lough Ennell) could uncover evidence for such field-fences, lanes and enclosures.

Early Irish historical sources and other archaeological evidence suggests that the land closest to the shore was probably used for tillage, gardens and vegetable plots, as well as enclosures for holding livestock, including those animals brought as tribute. Indeed, on lordly crannogs, the food eaten by the island's inhabitants would largely have been the *fief* (*taurchrecc* or *rath*) produced on the farms of the lord's clients, and on occasion large amounts of quality meat, milk, grain, malt, bread and vegetables would have been brought to the lakeshore. Indeed, on the occasions when people were providing winter hospitality for their lords, or when powerful individuals were holding feasts on their islands, cattle, sheep and pigs were probably being slaughtered on the lakeshore, and the joints of meat along with bread and drink were then transported out to the crannogs.

For the people working the land, daily life and seasonal tasks would all have been carried out within view of the island out on the lake. Most of the heavy labour carried out on the island's farm (i.e. ditch-digging, wood-cutting and the reconstruction of the crannog itself after storms) would have been done by the semi-free labourers (e.g. *fuidir*, *bothaig*) and male slaves (*mug*), while female slaves churned milk, ground grain and kneaded dough. Other servants, such as shepherds (*áugaire*) and cowherds (*búachaill*) also tended to cattle, sheep and pigs around the hills and slopes overlooking the lake, or these were tasks carried out by boys and girls. On occasion, the lord's clients and tenants would have gathered for other tasks on the farm, such as the saving of the harvest or the building of walls. In other words, instead of seeing crannogs as exotic, isolated places, the recognition from the archaeological evidence for rotary querns, plough parts, grain deposits and animal bone middens that these were islands inhabited by farming communities means that we have to imagine them as located within busy, intensively managed landscapes.

It has already been suggested that the Kiltoom crannogs on Lough Derravarragh were occupied by labourers or monastic tenants of the local early medieval monastery or church of *Cell Toma*, mentioned in the annals in the eighth and ninth century AD. At Kiltoom, it is possible that the lands to the west of the church were actually ploughlands, under tillage and used for the production of grain. If so, it is possible that the owners and inhabitants of the crannogs were labourers effectively living at the 'edge' of the church's farmland, who were responsible for working the fields beside them.

Islands, landscape and movement in early medieval Westmeath

Introduction

It is evident from the early Irish annals, saints' lives and narrative literature that islands were seen as places located within landscapes of travel and movement, both fantastic and real. In the voyage tales and adventure tales, saints and other heroes would progress by boat to and around islands, occasionally descending through them down into the otherworld. It is also true that the annals show that crannogs, particularly the larger prestige sites, were often attacked by raiding 'fleets' of armies who had travelled specifically to that lake for that purpose. It is also evident that early medieval crannogs were placed in locations that enabled or regulated movement through the landscape, either by locating them in proximity to riverine routeways or close to roadways along eskers. It is also interesting that crannogs in early medieval Westmeath occasionally seem to have been locally built in bays or inlets, where they could have best been seen by people moving along and around the lakeshore.

Crannogs and movement along watery routeways

It is evident that some early medieval crannogs in Westmeath were placed at locations that enabled their inhabitants to use, monitor and even control the major navigable, riverine routeways through the region, particularly the River Brosna and the River Inny. Although both of these rivers have been substantially altered by drainage and canalisation (in the drainage schemes of the 1960s), they remain navigable today in small boats. The early medieval crannogs of Donore (Lough Derravarragh), and Cullenhugh (Lough Iron) are located adjacent to the outlets of the River Inny, which flows south from the early medieval Uí Néill territories of Tethbae, and through the early medieval territories of the Uí Maicc Uais Mide (Moygoish), and along (the modern Westmeath/Longford border) the boundaries between the early medieval territories of the Cenél nEndaí (Rathconrath), the Cuircne (Kilkenny West) and the Máine (in Tethbae Deiscirt). It is particularly striking that the crannog at Donore, on Lough Derravarragh seems to have been located to 'watch' or monitor movement along the River Inny. Indeed, it is possible that there was a lengthy, wooden causeway or post row running from the crannog to the natural island of Clonava, on the north shore of the lake. It is conceivable that this was an early medieval ship barrier, designed to demarcate and mark a territorial boundary and to control movement along the river.

There is even more striking evidence for the location of crannogs on riverine routeways on Lough Ennell. The River Brosna flows through the lake, probably there defining the boundary between the early medieval territories of the Clann Cholmáin (as well as the Uí Gusáin) and the Fir Tulach, while to the south it was probably the boundary between the Cenél Fiachach (in Moycashel) and the Fir Tulach. The River Brosna flows off to the southwest, ultimately providing access to the River Shannon, the major navigable routeway in the Irish midlands. That access to the River Shannon might be important is reflected in the fact that early medieval lives of Ciarán and Senán imply that it was used as a routeway for traders and pilgrims from Gaul, while in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, the River Shannon was the means by which both Viking and Irish fleets attacked the territories of Mide and Connacht.

In the ninth and tenth century, the crannogs of Lough Ennell were obviously of some political, strategic and prestige importance to the Clann Cholmáin and Fir Tulach dynasties and to the monastery of Lynn, being used as strongholds, royal residences and as storehouses of wealth (e.g. silver hoards and ecclesiastical metalwork). Indeed, there are frequent annalistic references to military raids 'as far as Lough Aininn', while in AD

961, Domhnall, son of Muirheartach brought fleets over the Dabhall, and across Sliabh Fuaid, to Loch Ennell and plundered the islands of the lake.²⁰⁸ There is interesting evidence for the use of crannogs at both the inlet and outlet of the river into the lake. At the north end, the crannogs of School Boy Island and Rushy Island (both of which have produced ninth and tenth century artefacts) are located opposite the inlet of the river. At the southern end of the lake, the undated crannogs of Bog Island and Nure Island, also sit as a pair of sites either side of the main navigable routeway (the lakebed is only 1-2m below water surface at this end of the lake). It is conceivable that both crannogs are deliberately sited here as small, garrisoned islets, watching and controlling movement from the distant River Shannon. On Cherry Island, a stone cashel on a natural island on the east shore of the lake, there is even more striking evidence for this. In the twelfth-century *Life of Colmáin maic Lúacháin*, there are various references to *Inis na Cairrge* ('island of the rock') and *Port na Inse* ('harbour of the island') in relation to *Dun na Cairrge* ('fort of the rock') the stronghold or royal site of the Fir Tulach king. It is probable that the stone cashel on Cherry Island is an early medieval royal fort, perhaps occupied adjacent to another significant fort on the drylands. It is also possible (as there are no impressive sites on the adjacent dryland today) that the island cashel is in fact, the site of *Dún na Cairrge*. On the northern side of the cashel, there is a substantial stone-lined harbour, capable of holding a significantly large vessel, possibly an early medieval Nordic style warship. If this harbour is of early medieval date (as seems likely), then there was placed on the lake, a ship of sufficient size to resist and defend the local landscape, as well as to project power anywhere along the course of the River Brosna (and by extension, the River Shannon, into Connacht and Munster).

Other crannogs in early medieval Westmeath were also placed on smaller, navigable routeways. In the early medieval annals, there are references to substantial fleets of kings and dynasties wreaking havoc around the midlands, in Mide, Connacht and particularly on Lough Ree (Loch Ribh). However, it is likely that these 'fleets' were in reality collections of small boats, such as leather-covered coracles or dug-out boats. Their power lay in the armies they carried, rather than the size of the ships themselves. Such small boats would easily have moved along relatively small, shallow water courses, 1-2m in depth. On the River Adeel, in the eastern part of Westmeath, there are several crannogs situated along its length, the best-dated example being the early medieval crannog of Dryderstown, on Lough Annala. Although the River Adeel is a small, narrow field-drain along its upper course, it may have been rather more impressive in the early

²⁰⁸ *A.F.M.* 961.7.

middle ages and thence the crannog may have been placed on a nautical routeway that provided access to the River Boyne and into the early medieval territory of Brega.

However, these emphases on power, military fleets and strategic control and location of crannogs on riverine routeways should not blind us to the fact that most journeys in the early middle ages were local, as people moved around lands, for reasons of economy, trade, pilgrimage and travel between churches, public assemblies and fairs. It is likely that the region's crannogs also made use of such local networks of communication and travel. For example, it has been suggested that early medieval churches were often located on navigable routeways in the north midlands. On Lough Derravarragh, the early medieval church at Kiltoom (with crannogs on the adjacent lakeshore) is linked in early Irish sources with an early medieval monastery on Inchcleraun, on Lough Ree. Although the two sites are separated by many miles of overland travel, the social and economic relationships between them is more understandable when it is recognised that they are linked by a significant riverine routeway, the River Inny, which ultimately flows into Lough Ree.

Movement along esker roads and pathways

Roads and pathways were defining features of the early medieval settlement landscape.²⁰⁹ In seventh-century laws, the most important routeway was the regional road or *slige*, probably a linked series of local roads rather than a national routeway in the modern sense.²¹⁰ Through early medieval Mide, the two best-known roads were the *Slige Mór* ('the great way') which followed the line of eskers across the midlands from Dublin to Galway, while the *Slige Assail* ran from Tara, into Mide to the north of Mullingar, past Uisnech and on to the northwest.²¹¹ Other roads described in the sources include the road (*rout*), the byroad (*lamraite*), the curved road (*tograite*) and the cow track or droving road (*bothar*). The tenth-century Cormac's Glossary (compiled c.900 AD) also describes the *sét*, the *rót* (road used for wheeled transport and fenced on either side by a ditch or dyke), the *ramat* (or main highway, which passed by the residences of

²⁰⁹ For discussions of early medieval routeways, see, A.T. Lucas, 'Toghers or causeways: some evidence from archaeological, literary, historical and place-name sources' *R.I.A. Proc.* 85C (1985), pp 37-60; Conor MacDermott, 'A paved way in Bloomhill Bog, Counties Westmeath and Offaly' in *Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit Transactions* Vol. 4 (1995), pp 59-66; Conor MacDermott, 'The prehistory of the Offaly peatlands' in W. Nolan and T.P. O'Neill (eds.), *Offaly, history and society*, (Dublin, 1998), see Fig. 1.1, pp 22-25.

²¹⁰ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 390-93; The word *slige* is derived from the Old Irish verb 'to fell', implying the clearance of woodland or use of felled timber to make this type of roadway.

²¹¹ The location of these early medieval routeways on eskers in the midlands is discussed in Ó Lochlainn, 'Roadways in ancient Ireland', pp 465-74.

kings), the *slige*, *lamrotae*, *tuagrotae* and the *bóthar* (droving road).²¹²

In the early medieval settlement landscape, proximity to routeways increased the value of agricultural land. If land was beside a road leading to a monastery or the house of a lord, its value was increased by three cows. If it was a road leading to a wood, sea or mountain, the value of the land was increased by a cow.²¹³ However, while proximity to roads increased the value of land, local client farmers living near roads also had a public responsibility to maintain them, digging out the ditches beside them, filling in potholes and cutting away bushes. The maintenance of roads would have been important during times of winter visiting (*cóe*) by their lords, war or movement to assemblies. However, most common of all are the references to wooden and earthen causeways across bogs, known as *tochar*. The seventh-century *Life* of Saint Brigit describes how the king issues an edict to the people of the túath to construct a firm wide road, over boggy terrain, with branches, rocks and earth, capable of supporting chariots, horses wagon wheels and rushing people.²¹⁴

It is generally difficult, if not impossible, to identify early medieval routeways in the modern landscape, as generations of landscape alteration have removed traces of features that were probably not often very substantial anyway. However, it is possible to suggest the existence of some of these in early medieval Westmeath by reference to natural eskers running through settlement landscapes. At Newtownlow, an early medieval crannog (dated to the tenth century AD) was situated immediately south of an prominent esker, which formed part of the bifurcated esker known as Long Hill, west of Tyrellspass, Co. Westmeath (Fig. 5.16). It is likely that this was an early medieval roadway leading through the boggy, wet and hummocky glacial landscape of south Mide. Indeed, it is difficult to avoid the conclusion walking along this narrow roadway today that the crannog was deliberately sited there to provide the traveller with a view of the crannog, while enabling the crannog dwellers to see people moving along the routeway. That this was a significant routeway is probably also suggested by the Anglo-Norman motte, medieval parish church and seventeenth century church at Newtownlow. In this scenario, it is clear that the crannog is not at all isolated, but was deliberately placed along a regional and territorially important communications network.

²¹² Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, p. 391, note 210.

²¹³ Gearóid MacNiocaill, (ed.), 'Tír cumaile' in *Ériu* 22 (1971), pp 81-6.

²¹⁴ Seán Connolly and Jean-Michel Picard (ed.), 'Cogitosus: Life of Saint Brigit' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 117, (1987), pp 5-27.



Fig. 5.16 Photograph showing location of Newtownlow crannog, Co. Westmeath (sunlit area), from the steep esker slopes overlooking the site. Travellers along this probable early medieval routeway would have looked down upon the tenth-century crannog and ringfort at the edges of a small lake. In the twelfth century, an Anglo-Norman timber castle or motte was probably built on the ridge overlooking the crannog (to the left), deliberately appropriating this local power centre, thus revealing social and political changes to all those moving along the esker.

Other early medieval crannogs in the region are also located close to these natural esker routeways. In particular, the early medieval (sixth and ninth century) crannog at Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Offaly was probably deliberately located close to a early medieval routeway running along the esker nearby.

The proximity of crannogs to early medieval routeways can also be identified elsewhere, particularly at the early medieval ringfort and crannog of Coolure Demesne 1, on Lough Derravarragh. Along the north shore of the lake, there is a low, narrow moraine or esker running east-west and bearing the modern local roadway between the villages of Coole Upper and Castlepollard. The esker is typically about 10m in height and 20m in width, and runs through hummocky, waterlogged landscape with bogs and fens. At its northwest end, it ends at a large raised bog that runs along the Westmeath/Longford border to Lough Kinale. Where the esker ends, a bog trackway or *tochar* formerly crossed the raised bog, suggesting that the esker is indeed on an early routeway.²¹⁵ Another indicator

²¹⁵ N.M.I. Top. Files: Coolnagun twd ., Co. Westmeath, IA/86/68; A wooden trackway formerly crossed the raised bog and the River Inny at this point, between Coolnagun and Ballinealoe

that this is an early medieval routeway is the linear distribution of medieval ringforts along this same esker. Interestingly, the early medieval crannog and ringfort at Coolure would be slightly at a remove from the road. However, if (as is proposed here) the Coolure sites were early medieval royal residences, then this slight removal from roadway would be expected. In this case, the early medieval traveller would not necessarily have a good view of the power centres, but he or she would certainly be aware of their proximity.

Movement through early medieval lakeshore topographies of power

Movement was also an important way of experiencing and perceiving early medieval topographies of power, as the observer or traveller was controlled or manipulated, encouraging them to understand the world according to the ideology of the elite in society. There are two early medieval royal crannogs in Westmeath (Cróinis on Lough Derravarragh and Coolure Demesne on Lough Derravarragh) which are situated within local landscapes that appear to be constructed on the basis of the control of movement and there are striking similarities in the settlement landscapes that surround them. Both are surrounded by an *exclusion space* that enhances their prominence and uniqueness and increases the social distance surrounding the king. If we imagine how an early medieval traveller moving through the landscape towards these royal crannogs might have encountered and experienced it, we can gain a sense of their importance. The early medieval settlement landscape situated away from the crannog would have been familiar, ringforts, churches and holy wells linked by roads and paths. However, as the traveller moved through this landscape towards the sites, he would slowly have emerged into an 'empty space', out of the norm. This landscape may well have been used for farming, and the king's cattle and crops would have been visible on either side of the road, signalling the king's personal wealth.

Taking a phenomenological perspective to movement in these landscapes, one may dimly discern (recognising all the problems with this theoretical approach) what an early medieval traveller may have experienced. Walking towards these early medieval royal power centres on Lough Ennell and Lough Derravarragh, the traveller firstly sees the large early medieval *ringforts* (Dún na Sciath, Coolure Demesne, respectively) beside the shorelines, with their enclosing banks and ditches. The surrounds of these sites would have served as the more accessible early medieval public spaces, associated in people's

townlands. A wooden dish was recovered from its surface. At either 'end' of this trackway on the dryland there are concentrations of early medieval ringforts, suggesting that this was indeed used in the early Middle Ages.

minds with large public assemblies and other activities linked with hospitality and royal ritual. It is fascinating though, that at both Coolure and particularly at Cróinis, the *crannog* is the *last thing* that the walker sees.

On Lough Ennell, when one walks southwards along the ridge towards the early medieval settlement complex, the ringfort of Dún na Sciath first gradually emerges above the skyline. Indeed, on a summer's days, its raised platform and steeply sloping sides are cast dramatically against the sunlit, skyline to the south. Walking towards the ringfort, one is impressed by its scale and size and it dominates the view. However, it is only when one arrives at the ridge top, quite close to the ringfort, that the crannog of Cróinis in the lake suddenly appears. It emerges from behind and beyond the ringfort, appearing as a distant island out on the dark, choppy water of the lake (Fig. 5.17). In fact, the crannog then becomes more dramatic of the two sites along the lakeshore. However, it is here that the traveller must literally stop, standing on the shores of the lake, looking out at the crannog. Indeed, there may well have been a jetty, harbour or mooring place where the traveller was meant to stand and wait for access to be granted. Undoubtedly, the king may have often resided on the ringfort, but on the occasions when he was on his crannog, he was literally *out of view*.



Fig. 5.17 Photograph of Dún na Sciath ringfort and Cróinis crannog in the water beyond it, on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. This early medieval settlement complex is situated at some remove from the early medieval ringforts and churches at Dysart to the north, at the end of a promontory into the lake. An early medieval visitor would only have seen the crannog at the last minute, when he had reached the ringfort on the ridgeline, thus enhancing the social and symbolic significance of the distant island.

Indeed, this is an occasional motif in the early medieval saint's lives, whereby a person must wait on the shoreline before he is invited out to the king's island (see references in Chapter 4 above). In the *Life* of Colmáin maic Lúacháin, the saint goes one day to remonstrate with the king, but has to wait on the shoreline (as Colman was on his island fortress off *Port na hInse*, on Lough Ennell, probably Cherry Island) and the king refused to send out a boat to collect him. The saint blesses the lake and walks across it dryshod, in the manner of Moses on the Red Sea.²¹⁶ Similarly, in the Irish *Life* of Mochua of Balla, the saint is kept waiting on the shores of Lough Cime by Cennfaelad, son of Colcu, king of Connaught at a time when he was resident on his crannog. In this case, Mochua raises the waters of the lake so that the island is submerged, whereupon the penitent king gives him the island free from tribute. On another occasion, Mochua was refused entry onto the island of Inis Amalgaid, when again a boat was not brought out to him.²¹⁷ There is also a similar episode in the eighth-century Latin *Life* of Áed mac Bricc, when the king of the Uí Néill refuses to let Áed come onto his island, whereupon the saint walks across the water to free a prisoner.²¹⁸

In both the saint's lives and the narrative literature, there is a distinct place on the mainland, a harbour or jetty, where the visitor was expected to wait. In the early medieval prose tale, '*The death of the three sons of Diarmait mac Cerrbeóil*', the hero waits at a 'port' on the shoreline where the boats are kept before he goes out to Lagore, the royal crannog of the Síol nÁeda Sláine (see Chapter 7 below).²¹⁹ Similarly, in the ninth-century tale, *Tochmarc Becfhola*, people wait at a 'port' on the mainland and call out to the inhabitants of the island (see Chapter 4 above).²²⁰ In other words, access to the island was managed from the surrounding landscape, and any movement to the king's crannog was controlled from the shoreline first. Interestingly, at both Cróinis and Coolure Demesne, there are small crannogs at the lake's edge and these may well have been the 'front gate' of the royal crannog, where boats were laid up.

Conclusions

This chapter looked at the social, economic and ideological role of early medieval crannogs in the early medieval kingdom of Mide, in the north Irish midlands. This

²¹⁶ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Liachain*, § 64.

²¹⁷ Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, § 4823, p. 287.

²¹⁸ Heist, *Vitae sanctorum Hiberniae*, §176 para 31; thanks to Edel Bhreathnach for this reference.

²¹⁹ Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'The death of the three sons of Diarmait mac Cerrbeóil', in *Anecdota oxoniensia* (Oxford, 1894), p. 70; cited in Liam Price, 'The history of Lagore, from the annals and other sources' in Hencken, *Lagore*, pp 18-34, at p. 32.

²²⁰ Bhreathnach, 'A new edition of *Tochmarc Becfhola*', pp. 59-91, at p. 79.

broader regional and local landscape study works with ideas of how the settlement landscape was organised in social ways, with cultural beliefs and ideas about islands serving to influence and shape the ways that they were used, in landscapes of politics, warfare, agriculture and movement. In the next chapter, the focus will shift down towards the islands themselves to investigate how the physical architecture of crannogs was used and understood by the people of the time.

Chapter 6

Islands and architecture: the building, occupation and perception of early medieval crannogs

Introduction

Early medieval crannogs were built islets of stone, earth and timber, intended to provide people with a defined piece of land separated from the shore by water. They were, in reality and effect, *islands built by people*. What were people attempting to achieve when they built these islands? How did they work as social spaces, as bounded and inhabited pieces of land surrounded by water? What should be considered when scholars investigate them?

Irish archaeologists have been discussing the origins, chronology, morphology and apparent architecture of crannogs for well over a century, as can be seen from the publications of Wilde, Wood-Martin, Munro, Kinahan, Raftery.¹ In the 1940s, Oliver Davies proposed a classification of Irish crannogs based on his regional surveys in south Ulster. He suggested that the range of different types of sites included crannog-cairns (circular piles of stone retained by a palisade), clay mounds, log-platforms (timber beams laid radially in the manner of Scottish crannogs) and the *Packwerk*-crannog (built of layers of branches, twigs, sand and pegged by piles, but having little other formal structure).² In the 1980s, Kelly also suggested that crannogs in the north midlands were generally cairns and mounds of stone retained within inner and outer palisades.³ Recent crannog studies in Scotland have also provided useful insights into crannog construction, chronology and morphology.⁴ Finally, Fredengren's recent morphological classification of crannogs is based on her survey evidence from Lough Gara, Co. Sligo, but it will probably prove useful for other regional studies as well.⁵ Fredengren proposes that the various useful morphological features of a crannog can include its type (high-cairn, low-

¹ Early discussions of crannog chronology, morphology and architecture include Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, pp 30-4; Munro 'The structural features of lake-dwellings'; Kinahan, 'Observations on the exploration of crannogs'; Raftery, 'Lake-dwellings in Ireland', pp 5-15.

² Davies, 'Contributions to the study of crannogs in south Ulster', pp 14-30.

³ Kelly, 'Observations on Irish lake-dwellings', pp 81-98.

⁴ Holley *The artificial islets/crannogs of the central Inner Hebrides*, pp 50-64; J.C. Henderson, 'Islets through time: the definition, dating and distribution of Scottish crannogs' in *Oxford Journal of Archaeology*, 17, no. 2 (1998), pp 227-44; B.A. Crone, J.C. Henderson and R. Sands, 'Scottish crannogs: construction, collapse and conflation. Problems of interpretation' in Barry Raftery and Joyce Hickey (ed.), *Recent developments in wetland research* (Dublin, 2001), pp 55-64.

⁵ Fredengren, *Crannogs*, pp. 76-91.

cairn, platform), form (circular, oval/elongated, irregular), cross-section (even, mid-cairn, mid-hollow), edge slope (gradual, sharp, berm, bank), edge materials (revetment and external palisade, radial timbers, drystone walls) and other features (causeways, location in relation to original shore, bottom conditions). Her classification provides significant information on the date of these different types, suggesting that high-cairns will generally be early medieval in date, while low-cairn crannogs can either be early medieval or Late Bronze Age in date. Obviously, as with any classificatory scheme, it has a few potentially problematical aspects. In particular, her distinctions between types rests largely on her sharp, and arguably arbitrary, distinction between low-cairns (0.5m-2m in height) and high-cairns (2-3.5m in height), while other structurally potentially significant criteria, such as site diameter (or maximum internal dimensions), total enclosed area, or even surface fabric are not really considered.

Island histories: crannogs, time and social memory

Introduction

Crannogs were built, used and abandoned over long periods, and each site has its own individual history. Recent studies suggest that crannogs and lake-dwellings were used in Ireland in the Late Bronze Age, the early medieval and late medieval period and even up into the seventeenth and eighteenth century.⁶ However, although the long-term and changing use of crannogs is a significant and interesting topic, this thesis aims to explore how they were perceived, used and understood solely within the early medieval period (AD 400-1100), easily the era of their most intensive use. In my experience, the writing of long-term, multi-period archaeological studies can reveal interesting patterns in how different societies understood the world, but sprawling across vast time-spans, they tend to produce culturally 'thin' and unsatisfying narratives. It is hoped that by concentrating in this thesis on a particular focused period and culture (i.e. early medieval Irish society), and by using multidisciplinary approaches (using archaeology, early Irish history and anthropological studies), it will be possible to write a 'richer' history of Irish crannogs. As stated in the introduction, this is what the cultural anthropologist, Clifford Geertz famously referred to as the 'thick' description of a culture; the integration and constantly contextual interpretation of diverse evidence about social organisation, ideology, economic practices and symbolic beliefs.⁷ In this section then, I will assess the temporal rhythms of crannog building, habitation and abandonment across the early Middle Ages, to show how periods of intense activity were often interspersed with years

⁶ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 37-178.

⁷ Geertz, *The interpretation of cultures*, pp 9-10.

of inactivity, abandonment and silence.

Crannogs and chronology in Westmeath

In Westmeath, most crannogs appear to date to the early medieval period (between the sixth and the twelfth centuries AD), as indicated by dendrochronological or radiocarbon dating, artefacts or historical references. There are some crannogs in Westmeath with radiocarbon or dendrochronological dates, such as Castle Island (AD 855± 9 years, a mid-ninth century date from timbers), Cróinis (with a mid-ninth radiocarbon date from an outer palisade and an early-twelfth century dendrochronological date of AD 1107 ± 9 years from an inner palisade) and Goose Island (with a mid-ninth century AD from its outer palisade). The crannogs at Ballywillin, Toneymore North and Derragh, Co. Longford have also been dated to the early Middle Ages (see Table 6.2; Appendix 2). It is also striking that those crannogs that have been archaeologically excavated in Westmeath have also produced substantial early medieval artefact assemblages. It is clear from archaeological excavations that Ballinderry crannog no. 1, Co. Westmeath, was primarily occupied in the mid-tenth to late-eleventh century AD.⁸ The crannog at Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath was also clearly occupied between the mid-tenth (it has Anglo-Saxon coins dating to the 950s) and the twelfth century AD.⁹ Another early medieval crannog in the midlands region is Ballinderry crannog no. 2, Co. Offaly site, which had a pre-crannog occupation phase in the sixth century, followed by an palisaded crannog dated to the ninth-century AD.

It is also possible to establish the chronology of activity on a site by the material culture assemblage that has been recovered from its surface. Table 6.1 indicates that virtually all of the archaeological artefacts recovered from Westmeath's crannogs (19 sites in total) are early medieval in date (with some late medieval and post-medieval objects also). In contrast to other regions (e.g. Lough Gara), there are no crannogs that have produced any Bronze Age or Iron Age finds. In addition, although Mesolithic lithics have been recovered from the vicinity of crannogs on Westmeath's lakeshores (e.g. at Clonava, Lough Derravarragh, or at Cullenhugh, Lough Iron), they have never been recovered from actual crannog surfaces.

⁸ Hencken, 'Ballinderry no. 1';

⁹ Cormac Bourke, 'Newtownlow' in Claire Cotter (ed.) *Excavations 1985* (Dublin 1986), p. 40; Cormac Bourke, 'Newtownlow' in Claire Cotter (ed.) *Excavations 1986* (Dublin 1987), p. 37.

Table 6.1: Chronology of artefacts recovered from crannogs in Westmeath

Site	Lough	Crannog type	Artefacts
Ash Island	L. Ennell	Cairn (low)	Early medieval pins (4), stone lamp, copper-alloy finger ring, copper alloy sword pommel, iron spearhead
Ballinderry no. 1	Ballinderry L.	Mound (high)	Early medieval iron tools (knives, coulters, nails, socketed tools), weapons (swords, spearheads, axes, archery bow), stone hones, stone linen-smoothers, bone combs, wooden buckets, wooden carding combs, wooden paddles, wooden gaming board, silver kite brooches, bronze ringed pins, blue-glass bracelets, bronze hanging lamp, iron coulters, etc (late 10 th to late 11 th century AD).
Ballynakill 1	L. Derravarragh	Cairn (low)	Early medieval ring brooch, bronze mount, escutcheon, iron awl, animal bone (7 th -8 th century)
Castle Island	L. Lene	Cairn (high)	Early medieval bronze bell (early ninth-century), early medieval bronze basin (8 th -9 th century date), early medieval iron adze/axe head; mid-9 th century dendro. date), iron handle
Cherry Island Clonickilvant	L. Ennell White L.	Island cashel Mound (low)	Post-medieval coin hoard (17 th century) Early medieval clay crucible fragments with red enamel, spindle whorl, bronze pin, comb fragments, clay moulds, bronze globule (7 th -10 th century)
Coolure Demesne 1	L. Derravarragh	Cairn (high)	Early medieval enamelled bronze mount (5 th to 7 th century date), hand-pin (6 th -7 th cent. date?), early medieval bronze stick-pins, ringed-pins, bronze mount (9 th -11 th century date), Viking hack silver hoard (4 armlets, 6 ingot fragments) Viking silver bracelet, pair of copper-alloy balance scales, (10 th -11 th century AD) cattle, pig, sheep bone
Cróinis	L. Ennell	Cairn (high)	Early medieval stick pins (11 th -12 th century types, 9 th century c14 date, 12 th century dendro. date)
Cullenhugh Derrynagarragh	L. Iron Bishop's L.	Cairn (low) Island (enhanced)	Early medieval bronze mount Early medieval bronze pins (3), coins (9 th -10 th century)
Doonis	Doonis L.	Cairn (low)	Early Medieval/Late Medieval iron spade, billhook, pointed iron object, 3 parts of rotary quern, perforated stone hone, cattle, pig, sheep and red deer bone
Dryderstown	L. Annalla	Cairn (high)	Early medieval buckles, pins, brooches, mount, strap end, harp tuning peg, ring, silver ingot, bronze scabbard mount (7 th -10 th century date)
Dysart Island 1/2	L. Ennell	Cairn (high)	'Rocky island' early medieval hack silver ingot (9 th -10 th century AD)
Goose Island Johnstown	L. Ennell Johnstown L.	Cairn (high) Mound (low)	mid-9 th century c14 date. Early medieval bronze pin

Knockaville	Lough-a-Trim	Mound (low)	Early medieval comb (9 th -12 th century type), 2 bronze pins, bronze stick pins, bronze pennanular brooch
Newtownlow		Mound (low)	Early medieval crucibles, glass-making pan, studs, mounts, slag, furnace, Anglo-Saxon pennies (AD 950-5), 20 bronze stick pins, whetstone, querns, combs, iron axe, ladle, Late medieval (12 th -13 th cent.) green-glazed pottery, Late Medieval cast bronze pig; cattle, sheep, pig, goat, horse, red deer, hare, fox bone (10 th -13 th century)
Rushy Island	L. Ennell	Cairn (high)	Early medieval hack silver hoard (9 th -10 th century)
School Boy Island	L. Ennell	Cairn (high)	Early medieval bronze bells (8 th -9 th century AD)

Westmeath crannogs that have produced early medieval artefacts include sites at Coolure Demesne 1, Ballynakill (Lough Derravarragh), Cróinis, Rushy Island and School Boy Island (Lough Ennell), Castle Island (Lough Lene), Derrynagarragh (Bishop's Lough), Cullenhugh (Lough Iron), Dryderstown (Lough Analla), Clonickilvant (White Lough), Knockaville (Lough-a-Trim), Newtownlow and Ballinderry no. 1. These early medieval artefacts are usually in the form of stray finds of iron tools, bronze ringed pins and stick pins, brooches, bronze mounts and escutcheons, and occasional hack silver, ingot and coin hoards. These objects can date as early as the sixth to early seventh centuries AD (e.g. a decorated bronze mount with inset millefiori and a possible hand pin from Coolure Demesne crannog on Lough Derravarragh).¹⁰ However, it is striking that most of the objects, such as bronze ringed pins, stick pins and silver ingots, probably date to between the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries AD. This is certainly good dating evidence for early medieval activity upon these islands, particularly towards the end of the Middle Ages.

It is also clear that some of Westmeath crannog's were occupied throughout the early Middle Ages. At Coolure Demesne 1, a large crannog produced a fifth to seventh century enamelled mount, possibly from a shrine or other high-status item. However, the same site has also produced tenth to eleventh century bronze pins, silver ingots, bracelets, indicating a potential sequence of activity over several hundred years (Fig. 6.1a; Fig. 6.1b; Fig. 6.1c).

¹⁰ This is a small rectangular bronze mount, with an inset rectilinear pattern of red and yellow enamel, blue and white millefiori glass, probably datable to the late fifth to early seventh century AD; N.M.I. Top. Files, Coolure Demesne, Co. Westmeath, N.M.I. 1978:83; see Judith Carroll, 'Millefiori in the development of early Irish enamelling' in Cormac Bourke (ed.), *From the Isles of the North: Early medieval art in Britain and Ireland* (Belfast, 1995), pp 49-57, at p. 53, Fig. 2.



Fig. 6.1a Early medieval bronze enamelled mount (sixth to seventh century AD) found on Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, on Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).



Fig. 6.1b Early medieval hoard of Viking silver armlets (ninth to tenth century AD) found on Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, on Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. Most of the finds recovered from Westmeath's crannogs date to the early medieval period. (Source: National Museum of Ireland).



Fig. 6.1c Early medieval silver ingots (ninth to tenth century AD) found on Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, on Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. It is likely that this silver was obtained as political tribute, loot or plunder from Hiberno-Norse Dublin and distributed through the kingdom of Mide as gifts or within socially and politically binding agreements (National Museum of Ireland).

Ballynakill crannog, also situated on Lough Derravarragh, has also produced early medieval finds, including a seventh to eighth century bronze mount. It is also clear that several crannogs on Lough Ennell, such as Cróinis, Dysart Island, Schoolboy Island, Ash Island, Cherry Island (Lough Ennell) amongst many others (see Appendix 2) have produced early medieval finds.¹¹ At Dryderstown (Lough Annalla, in the Dysart Lakes complex), a crannog produced such diagnostic finds as early medieval pins, brooches, mounts, a strap end, harp tuning pin, a bronze scabbard mount and most importantly, a silver ingot of likely ninth to tenth century date. Other crannogs with early medieval finds include a crannog at Derrynagarragh (Bishops Lough) which produced early medieval bronze pins. The crannog of Castle Island (Lough Lene) has produced an early ninth-century bronze handbell and an eighth to ninth-century bronze basin (an ecclesiastical type, similar to the basin found at Derrynaflan, Co. Tipperary) lying in the waters off the crannog, as well as an early medieval woodworking adze.

¹¹ Mostly recovered by National Museum of Ireland staff from treasure hunters in the 1980s and 1990s.

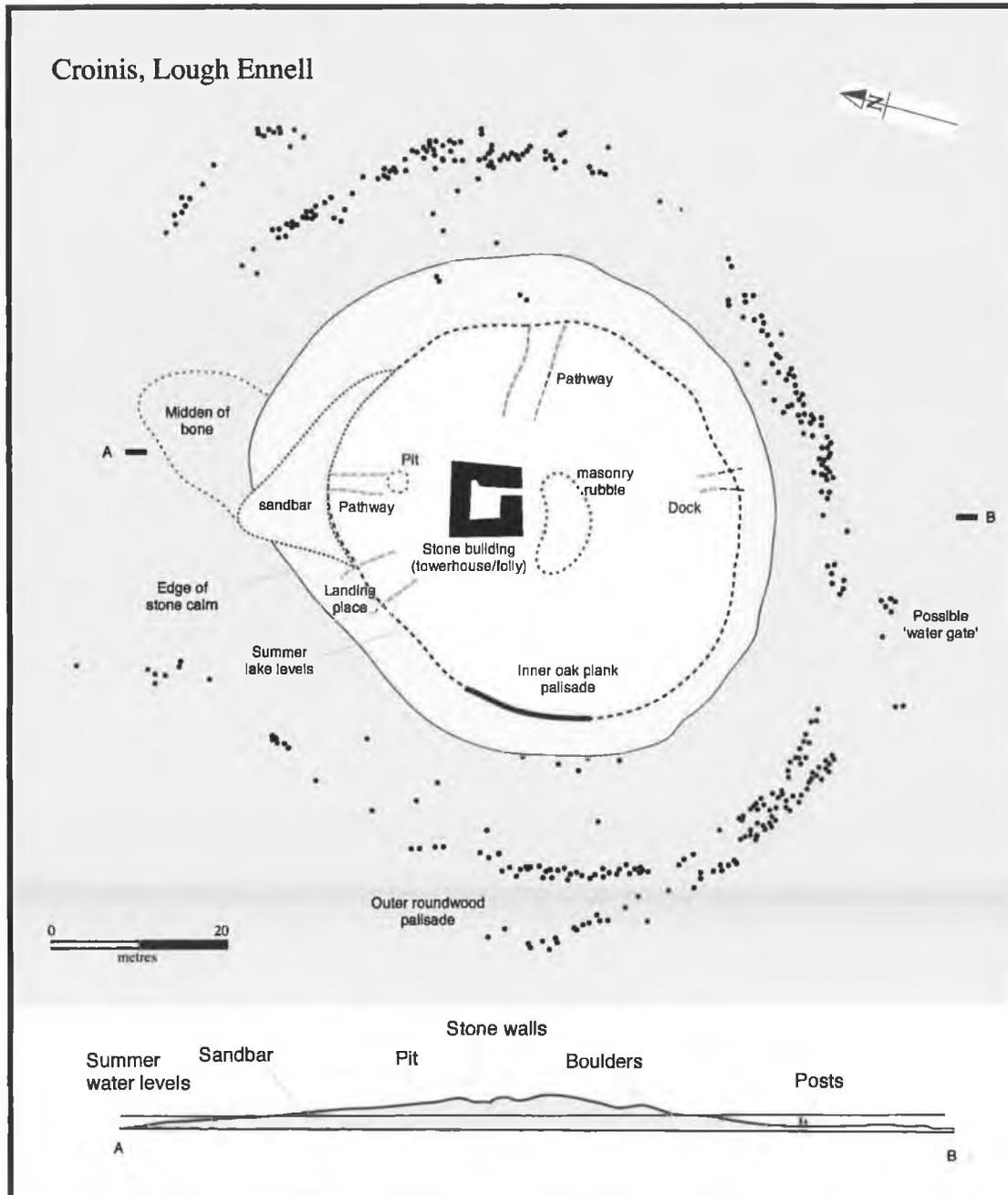


Fig. 6.2: Plan and cross-section of early medieval royal crannog of Croinis, on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath. The crannog was enclosed within an 'outer' roundwood palisade dated to the ninth century AD, while an 'inner' oak plank palisade was dated to AD 1107±9 years, suggesting its refortification in the early twelfth century AD. The ruins of a stone structure on the island may be the remains of a fifteenth century towerhouse, which was modified as a summer house in the nineteenth century AD (based on: Kelly, 'Observations on Irish lake dwellings'; A.S.I files, Westmeath RMP: 25:150).

At Cullenhugh (Lough Iron), a small low-cairn crannog produced a probable early medieval bronze buckle or mount. Some crannogs investigated by antiquarians in the nineteenth century also produced finds that are obviously of early medieval date. This includes the crannog of Clonickilvant (on White Lough), with its early medieval bronze pins, comb fragments, clay moulds and crucible fragments with adhering red enamel and bronze globules. The crannog at Knockaville (Lough-a-Trim) produced an early medieval bronze pennanular brooch, bronze stick pins and an early medieval bone comb. The latter object has been stylistically dated to the ninth to twelfth century AD.¹²

There are some chronological patterns that can be discerned. It is probable that crannogs in Westmeath were being first constructed and occupied from the sixth to seventh century AD, as elsewhere in northwest Ireland. It also seems likely from both dendrochronological and artefactual evidence that Westmeath crannogs were being intensively built on and occupied from the mid-ninth century, with abundant evidence for some type of use in the tenth and eleventh century AD. Towards the end of the early Middle Ages, there is also good dendrochronological dating evidence for the refortification of several crannogs in the early twelfth century (e.g. at Cróinis, Co. Westmeath, and in Tonymore North, Derragh, Co. Longford) (Fig. 6.2).¹³ Interestingly, there appears to be significantly less evidence for activity on crannogs in Westmeath in the late medieval period (apart from Cróinis and Newtownlow). It seems likely that within the territories of the Anglo-Norman colony, crannogs were identified as dwellings of the Gaelic Irish, and were consequently abandoned for a period. Interestingly, after the Gaelic resurgence in the fourteenth century, at least one of these sites (i.e. Cróinis) was re-occupied and re-fortified. The early medieval crannog of Newtownlow was also briefly re-occupied, probably in the late twelfth or early thirteenth century with finds including late medieval pottery, cast bronze objects and a ring brooch.¹⁴

Clearly, however, some of the Westmeath crannogs could date to other periods. In particular, it seems likely that the crannog at Doonis Lough, on the shores of Lough Ree, was originally a Bronze Age site. Intriguingly, this site has also produced an iron

¹² Howard Kilbride-Jones, *Zoomorphic penannular brooches* (London, 1980), p. 146, Fig. 50 ; Mairead Dunleavy, 'A classification of early Irish combs', *R.I.A. Proc.*, 88C (1988), pp 341-422, at p.367, p. 401, Fig. 8.

¹³ Kelly, 'Observations on Irish crannogs', pp 81-98 suggests that this was as a result of warfare between Mide and Connacht, particularly under the reign of Toirdelbhach Ua conchobair. It is also possible that it relates to the shift towards high-status nucleated settlement at the end of the early Middle Ages.

¹⁴ M.B. Deevy, *Medieval ring brooches in Ireland* (Bray, 1998), p. 102.

spade, billhook, rotary quern and a perforated stone hone, all probably of historic date.¹⁵ However, there is no reason to think that any of the large, high-cairn crannogs in Westmeath, built of stones, timber and marl and enclosed within wooden palisades, are anything but early medieval in date. However, they are likely to be multi-phase sites, being variously occupied, rebuilt and abandoned between the seventh and the twelfth centuries AD. Archaeological surveys and excavations elsewhere around the country now also confirm that many of the smaller crannogs in the region can also be dated to the early Middle Ages. Fredengren's work on Lough Gara, Co. Sligo indicates that small, low-cairn crannogs there can be dated to either the Late Bronze Age or the early medieval period. Although, she can discern little strong locational or morphological distinction, she suggests that those low-cairn crannogs with more heavy flagstones on the surface are more likely to be early medieval, while the Late Bronze Age ones are more likely to have a surface of 'shattered and fire-cracked stones'.¹⁶ Interestingly, there is now artefactual evidence that some of the low-cairn crannogs in Westmeath are also early medieval in date. For example, the low-cairn and low-mound crannogs at Cullenhugh (Lough Iron), Ballynakill 1 (Lough Derravarragh), Johnstown, Clonickilvant and Knockaville have produced early medieval bronze brooches, mounts, buckles or pins, suggesting activity on them in this period. In essence, this means that smaller crannogs in Westmeath were also being built and occupied in the early medieval period.

Crannogs and chronology in Ireland

Dendrochronology and radiocarbon dates from Irish crannogs

This raises the question of how typical the Westmeath crannogs are? How do they compare with the chronological ranges of crannogs in Ireland? Table 6.2 presents the evidence of dendrochronological and radiocarbon dates obtained from at least 71 Irish crannogs.¹⁷ This is the largest list of crannog dates yet assembled in Irish archaeology. It makes it clear that crannogs can potentially be dated from the Bronze Age, early medieval period, the late medieval period and the early modern or post-medieval period. However, even within this broad dating range, there is significant evidence that there was

¹⁵ My recent archaeological survey indicates that some of the Doonis crannog palisade posts were cut with a Bronze Age axe (see Appendix 2; Catalogue of crannogs in Westmeath). The finds were recovered from a 'crannog on Doonis Lough' in 1968; (N.M.I. Top. Files, Doonis townland, Co. Westmeath; IA/59/68, D29:11).

¹⁶ Fredengren, *Crannogs*, p. 105.

¹⁷ Table 6.2 has been amassed from various published reports and unpublished archives. In particular, I would like to thank Mr. Dave Brown for providing me with the unpublished archive of dendrochronological and radiocarbon dates produced by the School of Palaeoecology and Archaeology, Queen's University Belfast and Ms. Claire Foley, Environment and Heritage Service for unpublished radiocarbon dates from the Fermanagh crannog survey.

an explosion of crannog construction and occupation in the early Middle Ages.¹⁸ Over half (52 per cent) of all scientifically dated Irish crannogs were built and used in the early medieval period. For example, of the 30 Irish crannogs dated by dendochronology, 21 (70 per cent) showed some building activity between the sixth and the twelfth century, suggesting that the building of *oak plank palisades* was a predominantly early medieval phenomenon.¹⁹ The evidence from radiocarbon dates is much less unequivocal, suggesting a much wider range of dates, but even here there is a strong suggestion of intensive activity on crannogs throughout the early medieval period. Of the 41 sites dated by radiocarbon dating, 16 (40 per cent) date between the seventh and the twelfth century AD.

Table 6.2: Dendrochronological and radiocarbon dates from Irish crannogs

Dendrochronological dates		
Site name	County	Dendro. Date
<i>Bronze Age/Iron Age</i>		
Cullyhanna Lough	Armagh	1526 BC
Moynagh Lough	Meath	922 ± 9 BC
Tully Lough	Monaghan	AD 303 ± 9 years or later
<i>Early medieval</i>		
Mill Lough	Fermanagh	AD 553 ± 9 years or later
Midges Island,	Antrim	AD 570 ± 9, AD 612 ± 9
Ross Lough	Fermanagh	AD 570 ± 9 years
Teeshan	Antrim	AD 581
Island MacHugh,	Tyrone	AD 601, 602, 603, 608, 611, 614, 619
Levallinree Lough	Mayo	AD 609-10
Lough Tamin	Antrim	AD 618 ± 9
Moynagh Lough 2	Meath	AD 625 ± 9 years
Moynagh Lough 1	Meath	AD 748
Kilnock	Antrim	AD 722 ± 9 years or later
Frenchgrove	Mayo	AD 733 ± 9 years or later
Ballywillin	Longford	AD 785 ± 9 years or later
Loughmore	Mayo	AD 803 ± 9 years or later
Seltan Lough	Leitrim	AD 816 ± 9 years
Tonymore North	Longford	AD 818 ± 9 years
Gortermone Lough	Leitrim	AD 826
Ballinderry No.1	Westmeath	AD 827 ± 9 years or later
Castle Island	Westmeath	AD 855 ± 9 years

¹⁸ These are only the 'scientific' dates from Irish crannogs. It should also be remembered that virtually all of the major crannog excavations produced substantial artefactual evidence for primary occupation between the seventh and the eleventh century AD, while most of the stray finds recovered from Irish crannogs, whether by past antiquarians or modern treasure hunters also date to the early medieval period; R. Warner, pers. comm (Ulster Museum), E.P. Kelly, pers. comm (National Museum of Ireland).

¹⁹ It is worth noting a need for caution here, as oak palisades clearly represent only one particular building event on crannogs, not always that of the primary or even main habitation phase. It is also worth remembering that the construction of an oak palisade may have been a signifier of social rank. In the seventh and eighth century, oak was a high-status building material to which access was restricted; Aidan O'Sullivan, 'The use of trees and woodland in early medieval Ireland' in *Botanical Journal of Scotland*, 46, no. 4 (1994), pp 674-81.

Garadice Lough	Leitrim	AD 1015 ± 9 years or later
Teeshan	Antrim	AD 1041 ± 9 years or later
Lough Nahinch	Tipperary	AD 1043 ± 9 years or later
Derragh Lough	Longford	AD 1050 ± 9 years
Cróinis	Westmeath	AD 1107 ± 9 years or later
Lough Kinale	Longford	AD 1107 ± 9 years or later
Gortermone Lough	Leitrim	AD 1131 ± 9 years
Tonymore North	Longford	AD 1183 ± 9 years

Late medieval

Aghnahinch Lough	Fermanagh	AD 1434 ± 9 years or later
Corban Lough	Fermanagh	AD 1457
Lough Eyes	Fermanagh	AD 1459 ± 9 years or later
Lough Island Reavy	Down	AD 1508 ± 9 years or later

Early modern

Carrick Lough	Fermanagh	AD 1544 ± 9 years or later
Loughinsholin	Derry	AD 1639

Radiocarbon dates

Site name	County	Lab. code	Age (BP)	Calibrated (2 sigma, 95%)
<i>Neolithic/Bronze Age</i>				
Lough Eskragh	Tyrone	UB-1472	2590 ± 45	833-541 BC
Lough MacNean Lr.	Fermanagh	UB-3198	2695 ± 37	909-800 BC
Moynagh Lough	Meath	GrN-11443	5270 ± 60	4245-3971 BC
-	-	GrN-11442	3460 ± 35	1879-1688 BC
-	-	GrN-12359	2650 ± 80	1000-529 BC
-	-	OxA-4268	1660 ± 70	AD 229-561
BOYL26 (low-cairn)	Lough Gara	-	2640 ± 45	900-760 BC
KILN7:001 (low-cairn)	Lough Gara	-	2700 ± 20	900-805 BC
KILN7B:001	Lough Gara	-	2730 ± 30	930-810 BC
KILA16:001	Lough Gara	-	2690 ± 20	900-800 BC
KILA16:002	-	-	2170 ± 30	360-110 BC
KILA16:003	-	-	2130 ± 20	210-90 BC (88.5%)
KILA16:003	-	-	2220 ± 30	390-200 BC
KILA16:004	-	-	2220 ± 30	390-200 BC
KILA16:005	-	-	2140 ± 20	21-90 BC (81%)
KILC21:001	Lough Gara	-	2740 ± 25	930-820 BC
KILC21:002	-	-	2270 ± 20	980-830 BC
KILC21:003	-	-	2680 ± 25	900-800 BC
KILC21:004	-	-	2710 ± 40	930-800 BC
KILC21:005	-	-	2690 ± 30	900-800 BC
KILC21:B001	-	-	2610 ± 50	900-750 BC (73.4%)
KILA46:001	Lough Gara	-	2210 ± 20	380-190 BC
KILA46:002	-	-	2150 ± 25	240-90 BC
<i>Early medieval sites</i>				
KILC20:001	Lough Gara	-	1230 ± 20	AD 760-890 (72.5%)
KILC20:002	-	-	1190 ± 20	AD AD770-900
KILC22:001	Lough Gara	-	1290 ± 30	AD 660-780
KILC22:002	-	-	1240 ± 30	AD 680-890
KILC22:003	-	-	1180 ± 40	AD 770-980

KILC22:004	-		1170 ± 30	AD 770-970
KILC22:005	-		1170 ± 30	AD 770-970
KILC22:006	-		1160 ± 30	AD 770-980
KILC22:007	-		1110 ± 25	AD 880-1000
KILA11:001	Lough Gara	-	1040 ± 20	AD 970-1030
KILA11:002	-	-	1130 ± 30	AD 810-900
KILF5:B001	Lough Gara	-	1180 ± 20	AD 770-900
KILF12:001	-	-	1120 ± 60	AD 770-1020
KILN13:B001	-	-	113.8 ± 0.6	AD 1690-1920
BOYL38:B001	Lough Gara	-	970 ± 30	AD 1000-1160
BOYL38:002	-	-	1180 ± 20	AD 770-900
BOYL38:003	-	-	970 ± 30	AD 1000-1160
BOYL38:004	-	-	1110 ± 25	AD 880-1000
KILA34:B001	Lough Gara		1190 ± 60	AD 80-980
Teeshan	Antrim	UB-742	1495+-35	AD 529-644
Teeshan	Antrim	UB-266	1795+-65	AD 82-388
Teeshan	Antrim	UB-743	1605+-30	AD 399-538
Cloverhill Lough	Sligo	ST-7622	1085+-90	AD 883-1024
Cloverhill Lough	Sligo	LU-1841	1120+-50	AD 886-992
Derryhowlaght East	Fermanagh	UB-3719	1262 ± 38	AD 670-876
Aughy (Lough Barry)	Fermanagh	UB-2334	1170 ± 45	AD 724-981
Derrycanon (Corragh L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2515	1105 ± 30	AD 888-1000
Belcoo East (L. MacNean)	Fermanagh	UB-2507	915 ± 30	AD 1031-1207
Kilturk West (Kilturk L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2498	890 ± 40	AD 1031-1223
Kilturk North	Fermanagh	UB-2499	885 ± 35	AD 1036-1222
Killyhevlin (Lough Yoan)	Fermanagh	UB-2335	845 ± 40	AD 1044-1276
Mill Lough	Fermanagh	UB-267	685+-80	AD 1193-1420
Ballydoolough (Lough)	Fermanagh	UB-2503	580 ± 55	AD 1298-1429
<i>Late medieval/early modern sites</i>				
Keenaghan (Keenaghan L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2509	515 ± 35	AD 1327-1445
Lough Eyes	Fermanagh	UB-769	515+-30	AD 1330-1442
Largalinny (Carrick L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2508	505 ± 40	AD 1325-1467
Coolbuck (Lough Eyes)	Fermanagh	UB-2514	355 ± 50	AD 1449-1639
Parkhill (Parkhill L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2512	260 ± 40	AD 1491-1947
Derraclug & Drumaa	Fermanagh	UB-2513	460 ± 40	AD 1335-1612
Aghnaloo (Lough Corban)	Fermanagh	UB-2511	450 ± 45	AD 1401-1623
Tattycam/Rateen	Fermanagh	UB-2506	340 ± 45	AD 1458-1643
Lankill (Lankill L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2505	355 ± 35	AD 1454-1636
Farm (Aghnahinch L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2510	345 ± 40	AD 1461-1640
Mullyduff (Mullyduff L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2336	325 ± 50	AD 1459-1653
Tawnyreagh (L. Raymond)	Fermanagh	UB-2502	285 ± 40	AD 1487-1792
Cackinish (Mill Lough)	Fermanagh	UB-2501	240 ± 40	AD 1520-1948
Killyfoyle/Loughgare	Fermanagh	UB-2500	235 ± 60	AD 1488-1950
Lenaghan (Bunnahone L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2333	160 ± 40	AD 1662-1950
Drumgay (Drumgay L.)	Fermanagh	UB-2504	180 ± 35	AD 1652-1949
Drumlone (Pad Lough)	Fermanagh	UB-2516	130 ± 65	AD 1667-1955

Bronze Age crannogs and lake dwellings

It is now clear that crannogs - artificial watery islets and mounds retained within wooden palisades- were being built as early as the Late Bronze Age in Ireland. Until recently, it was recognised that Late Bronze Age lake settlements had been identified at Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone,²⁰ Knocknalappa, Co. Clare,²¹ Clonfinlough, Co. Offaly,²² Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Westmeath²³, Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath,²⁴ Island MacHugh, Co. Tyrone²⁵ and at Crannog 61, Rathinaun, Co. Sligo.²⁶ Fredengren's recent surveys on Lough Gara have now also produced definite evidence from at least five sites (see Table 6.2: Boyl26, Kiln7, Kila16, Kilc21, Kila46), for small palisaded islands constructed in lake water, with sites dated to both the Late Bronze Age and perhaps even the early Iron Age.²⁷ These Late Bronze Age crannogs tend to be low cairns or mounds of small stones, clay and brushwood, occasionally enclosed within wooden palisades. In terms of their siting, they have variously been located in bogs, fens and marshes, or out in the water of lakes (particularly in Lough Gara). However, the morphological and locational distinctions between Late Bronze Age and early medieval crannogs have been overstated in the past, as I have previously stated and as has now been recently confirmed.²⁸ These Bronze Age sites have previously been interpreted as island or wetland settlements or as places for metalworking production. They produce the domestic or industrial debris typically associated with settlements, such as houses, pottery, saddle querns, animal bone, tools, but they also produce swords, spearheads, human skulls and dress ornaments. Therefore, given the lack of distinction between the sacred and the profane amongst Bronze Age communities, I have also previously suggested that they may also have been significant locales for public ceremony, cult or

²⁰ Collins and Seaby, 'Lough Eskragh, Co. Tyrone', pp 25-37 ; Williams, 'Excavations at Lough Eskragh', pp 37-48.

²¹ Raftery, 'Knocknalappa crannóg', pp 53-72; E. Grogan, A. O'Sullivan, F. O'Carroll and I. Hagen, 'Knocknalappa, Co. Clare: a reappraisal' in *Discovery Programme Reports* 5, (Dublin, 1999), pp 111-24.

²² A. Moloney, D. Jennings, M. Keane and C. MacDermott, *Excavations at Clonfinlough, Co. Offaly* (Dublin, 1993).

²³ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog No. 2', pp 1-76.

²⁴ John Bradley, 'Living at the water's edge' in *Arch. Ire.*, 35 (1996), pp 24-26; John Bradley, 'Archaeological excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1995-96' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 9, no. 3 (1997), pp 50-61.

²⁵ Oliver Davies, *Excavations at Island MacHugh* (Belfast, 1950); Ivens, *et al* 'Excavations at Island MacHugh', pp 99-103.

²⁶ Raftery, 'Lake-dwellings in Ireland', pp 5-15 ; Raftery, *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, pp 32-5.

²⁷ Fredengren, *Crannogs*, pp 161-223

²⁸ O'Sullivan, 'Interpreting the archaeology of Bronze Age lake settlements' in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 8 (1998), pp 115-121.

ritual activity, such as the deliberate deposition of human skulls and metalwork into a watery grave.²⁹

Early medieval crannogs: late sixth to early seventh centuries AD

However, it is in the early medieval period that crannogs really start to be built (after a significant gap in the late Iron Age). This appears to begin with an initial phase of crannog building activity over an eighty-year period, in the late sixth/early seventh centuries AD. Dendrochronological dates indicate crannog building in the late sixth-century at Mill Lough (AD 553±9), Midges Island (AD 570±9), Ross Lough (AD 570±9), Teeshan (AD 581).³⁰ It is also interesting that several other sites, such as at Ballinderry no. 2,³¹ and Moynagh Lough (see Appendix 3), have also produced evidence for 'pre-crannog' occupation in the sixth century. At the beginning of the seventh-century, there are also dendrochronological dates from Island MacHugh (between AD 601-619), Levallinree, Co. Mayo (AD 610), Tamin, Co. Antrim (AD 618±9) and Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath (AD 625±9). There are few if any radiocarbon dates from this early stage. The origins of this phase of crannog building are unclear, and presumably relate to a whole raft of social, economic and ideological developments at this stage in early medieval Ireland. Crone had previously suggested that as Scottish crannogs were being built in the late Iron Age (i.e. second to third centuries AD, when there is still no evidence for crannog construction on this island), that the 'crannog concept', the *idea* of building and living on an artificial defended islet, was introduced into northeast Ireland from southwest Scotland.³² Warner in exploring the archaeological evidence for cultural connections between the populations of southwest Scotland and northern Ireland was certainly able to show that Irish type artefacts had been found on several late Iron Age Scottish crannogs.³³ However, this diffusionist model of explanation seems unlikely for various reasons, not least the fact that these sixth/seventh century dates occur right across Ulster, Connacht and the north midlands. In fact, the most recent dating evidence suggests that there was a flurry of crannog building in *both* Ireland and Scotland, in the late sixth/early seventh century AD, suggesting a contemporary explosion of activity.³⁴

²⁹ O'Sullivan, 'Interpreting the archaeology of Bronze Age lake settlements', p. 121

³⁰ Baillie, 'An interim statement on dendrochronology at Belfast', pp 72-84.

³¹ Conor Newman, 'The archaeology of Ballinderry Lough'. Unpublished MA thesis, N.U.I., (Dept. of Archaeology, University College, Dublin, 1986), pp 81-119 ; Newman, 'Ballinderry crannóg No. 2, Co. Offaly: Pre-crannóg early medieval horizon', pp 99-124.

³² Crone, 'Crannogs and chronologies', pp 245-54.

³³ R.B. Warner, 'Ireland, Ulster and Scotland in the earlier Iron Age' in A. O'Connor and D. Clark (eds) *From the Stone Age to the 'Forty-five* (Edinburgh, 1983), pp 161-87.

³⁴ Anne Crone, *The history of a Scottish lowland crannog: excavations at Buiston, Ayrshire 1989-90*

There is probably a range of reasons why people began to build crannogs in lakes in the late sixth/early seventh centuries AD. Previously, archaeologists have tended to resort to explanations derived from models of contemporary social upheaval or economic collapse. They suggest that political upheaval, a period of increased warfare and a growing perception of risk in the late sixth century were significant factors. However, while the vigorous political expansion of the Uí Néill dynasties out of their west Ulster heartlands begins in the sixth century, the late sixth/early seventh century was no more violent than any other period in early Irish history.³⁵ Crone suggested that the nobility began building island fortresses at a time when increased economic wealth and a rising population had created a competition for land and resources.³⁶ However, it is now clear that not all crannogs are high status sites, and that the poor and merely ordinary were also building and inhabiting such islets. Admittedly, the best dating evidence for this is at Sroove, on Lough Gara, and there not until slightly later, in the late seventh/eighth centuries AD, but it does emphasise the importance of not seeing crannogs as solely defensive or militarily strategic sites.

Baillie suggested from the evidence from tree-ring studies, ice core studies and contemporary documentation that there was a period of significant global climatic deterioration for a decade beginning in AD 536, leading to crop failure, famine, death and plague. He suggested that this led to an increase in the use of defended fortifications amongst a fearful, perhaps even destabilised society.³⁷ But even if it is accepted that there was a climatic downturn between the years AD 536-550, this hardly explains the beginning of the construction of crannogs some two to three *decades* later, in the 570s.

It seems more likely that people's choice of crannogs as habitations, refuges and fortresses was dependant on a variety of factors, social, economic and ideological, and more often based on local events. In fact, it may most strongly relate to a growing tendency for small social units (e.g. families and households) to inhabit enclosed dwellings, and that crannogs were largely a watery manifestation of other contemporary bounded settlements (e.g. ringforts, early monastic enclosures). In other words, islands may have been an increasingly useful means of expressing the identity of a small social group, such as a family or household.

(Edinburgh, 2000), p. 161.

³⁵ MacNiocaill, *Ireland before the Vikings*, pp 70-101.

³⁶ Crone, 'Crannogs and chronologies', pp 245-54.

³⁷ R.B. Warner, 'Tree-rings, catastrophes and culture in early Ireland: some comments' in *Emania* 11,

Early medieval crannogs: seventh to eighth centuries AD

There is then within the early Middle Ages, the suggestion of an apparent gap or hiatus in crannog construction between AD 625 and *c.* AD 720. This corresponds to a general lack of other building activity with oak trees (i.e. in horizontal mills, etc), at least as far as can be shown by dendrochronological studies. Again, the spectre of plague, population decrease and social upheaval might be invoked, as the annals mention plagues in AD 664 and 668. This is a highly debatable explanation, but it is interesting that the radiocarbon dates also suggest a similar lack of crannog construction activity in the late seventh to early eighth century. Only the early medieval crannogs at Derryhowlaght East, Co. Fermanagh (with a radiocarbon date of between AD 670-726) and KILC22, on Lough Gara (two calibrated radiocarbon dates of AD 660-780 and AD 680-890) have produced dates that even partially span this era. Within the vagaries of radiocarbon dating (i.e. the potential broad time span when a radiocarbon date is calibrated to 95 per cent or two sigma), their occupation levels could easily be post *c.* AD 720). This hiatus may be more apparent than real. In the early medieval phase W, occupation levels at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath (stratigraphically dated to the late seventh to early eighth century), there was a circular house with an internal rectangular hearth, while there was also activity relating to pits, gravel spreads and a furnace, suggesting that at this site at least there was a continuity of occupation.³⁸ There are also two annalistic references to the building of island fortresses in AD 703 and AD 725 (see discussion of island building below), although the locations of those sites is unknown

Early medieval crannogs: eighth to ninth centuries AD

In any case, the dendrochronology dates suggest that it is not until the middle of the eighth century AD that oak palisades were being built on crannogs again, such as at Frenchgrove, Co. Mayo (AD 733 ± 9) and Ballywillin, (Lough Kinale) Co. Longford (AD 785 ± 9). At Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath, there is both the dendrochronological date of AD 748 from the site palisade, as well as the abundant archaeological evidence for mid-eighth century crannog occupation (the Phase Y roundhouses and metalworking areas). There is also an interesting period of activity in the early to mid-ninth century AD, from at least six crannogs across the north midlands and the northwest. This includes the iron working crannog at Loughmore (Bofeenaun), Co. Mayo (AD 803 ± 9), a crannog at Tonymore North (Lough Kinale), Co. Longford

(1993), pp 13-19; M.G.L Baillie, 'Patrick, comets and Christianity' in *Emania* 13, (1995), pp 69-78.

³⁸ Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' (1991), p. 22 ; Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' (1994-1995), pp. 158-169.

(AD 818 ± 9), Seltan Lough, Co. Leitrim (AD 816 ± 9), Gortermone Lough, Co. Leitrim (AD 826), stone-built crannog at Castle Island, Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath (AD 855 ± 9), as well as an unusually early, and perhaps irrelevant (or yet poorly understood), date from Ballinderry crannog No. 1 at AD 827 ± 9. (Most of the site's evidence strongly suggests tenth to eleventh century occupation). There are also several low-cairn crannogs on Lough Gara that have produced a swathe of radiocarbon dates between the eighth and tenth centuries AD.

This phase of crannog construction (admittedly from geographically widely dispersed sites) occurs during the most intense period of Viking raids and warfare, between AD 820-850.³⁹ It is certainly tempting to suggest that these crannogs were being built in response to a perception of danger and violence. There is certainly an interesting phenomenon whereby eighth to ninth-century ecclesiastical metalwork (for instance, copper-alloy hand bells, copper-alloy basins, crosses and bookshrines) were deliberately placed in the water off crannogs around the midlands (e.g. the Lough Kinale bookshrine was found off Tonymore Island crannog, Co. Longford while a bronze hand-bell and basin were found off the ninth-century crannog at Castle Island, Lough Lene Co. Westmeath. The find circumstances of these objects suggest that they had been disassembled and dropped into 1-2m water depth, typically 10-15m offshore. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that the dramatic deposition of such valuable objects into water was due to people's real or imagined fears for their safety. However, it could as easily have been Irish marauders as Viking raids that were being feared. More importantly, this increase in Viking raids in the mid-ninth century nationally, conceals the fact that there were actually relatively few attacks on midlands sites (apart from Lough Ree in the mid-840s).⁴⁰ Perhaps perception was sufficient cause of concern, if actuality was not.

Early medieval crannogs: tenth and eleventh centuries AD

Another remarkable aspect of the dating evidence presented in Table 6.2 is the extent to which it can now be shown that crannogs were also built on in the eleventh and twelfth century, towards the end of the early Middle Ages. This is particularly clear in the dendrochronology dates. There were obviously events of oak plank palisade construction between AD 1000-1200 on crannogs at Garadice Lough, Co. Leitrim (AD 1015 ± 9), Gortermone Lough, Co. Leitrim (AD 1131 ± 9), Teeshan, Co. Antrim (AD 1041 ± 9),

³⁹ Colmán Etchingam, *Viking raids on Irish church settlements in the ninth century* (Maynooth, 1996), pp 7-16, Fig. 2.

⁴⁰ Etchingam, *Viking raids*, p. 19, map 2.

Lough Nahinch, Co. Tipperary (AD 1043 ± 9), Cróinis, Co. Westmeath (AD 1107 ± 9), and at Derragh Lough (AD 1050 ± 9) and Tonymore North (AD 1183 ± 9), both on Lough Kinale, Co. Longford. Similarly, there are a range of radiocarbon dates that suggest activity in the eleventh and twelfth century on crannogs at Belcoo East, Kilturk West and Kilturk North, Killyhevlin and Mill Lough (all in Co. Fermanagh).

These crannog dates provide good archaeological evidence for significant changes in settlement and society that appears to have been taking place before and at this time. It also generally tallies with the increasingly rich historical evidence for references to island dwellings in annals and saints' lives (see below) towards the end of the early Middle Ages. It has been argued that in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD, Irish society had already become an essentially feudal society, with significant changes in concepts of kingship, an increased emphasis on military activity and a restructuring of social obligations towards labour services. Although archaeological evidence for this social transformation is less clear (ringforts are being abandoned, but what replaces them in the rural landscape is unknown), it is possible that there was an increased emphasis on forms of nucleated settlement, potentially gathered around either significant church sites or major centres of lordly power.⁴¹ In particular, large fortresses, in the form of raised raths, may have been constructed at this time, their heightened or elevated nature fulfilling both military needs, and a social and ideological interest in literally projecting power across the landscape.⁴² The construction of crannogs at this time may reflect this, although it may be interesting that some of these sites were clearly being re-activated, rather than newly built. For example, at both Cróinis, Co. Westmeath and Tonymore North, Co. Longford, ninth-century crannogs were apparently reconstructed and refortified with oak plank palisades in the early twelfth century AD.

Late medieval crannogs: AD 1200-1534

In the late medieval period (i.e. after AD 1200), the dendrochronological dates and radiocarbon dates clearly signal a phase of renewed crannog occupation and building activity, although this really only occurs in those regions outside Anglo-Norman control (i.e. the Gaelic lordships of the northwest and west Ulster). Late medieval crannog structures that have been dated by dendrochronology include those at Aghnahinch Lough, Corban Lough, Lough Eyes, Carrick Lough, Co. Fermanagh, Lough Island Reavy, Co. Down, and Loughinsholin, Co. Derry. There is a similar range of late medieval dates

⁴¹ Tadhg O'Keeffe, *Medieval Ireland: An archaeology* (Stroud, 2000), p 26; Doherty, 'The Vikings in Ireland: a review', pp 322.

⁴² Graham, 'Early medieval Ireland', pp 42-4.

in the list of radiocarbon dates. This is unsurprising, as there is already abundant historical evidence from these regions, particularly in terms of annalistic entries, to the fact that crannogs continued to be built and re-occupied by the Gaelic Irish.⁴³

This is particularly striking in Fermanagh, amongst the drumlin lakelands of south Ulster. Of the twenty-six crannogs in Fermanagh that have been dated by radiocarbon dating, eighteen have been dated to after c.AD 1200. The recovery of large numbers of late medieval artefacts from crannogs in Fermanagh also supports this idea of intensive activity then.⁴⁴ Both archaeological and historical evidence suggest that such late medieval crannogs were being used as both lordly sites and ordinary dwellings, as prisons and as military fortifications in the northwest in the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth century. I have previously argued that early medieval crannogs may have been re-activated precisely because they were places associated with the past in local stories, and may have been symbolic of Gaelic order.⁴⁵ In complete contrast, elsewhere, particularly in the midlands and east, there is little evidence for late medieval occupation on crannogs. In the north midlands, such as in Westmeath, late medieval finds from crannogs are very rare, suggesting that these sites had been largely abandoned after AD 1200. A few sites elsewhere, such as Clea Lakes and Lough Faughan, Co. Down, in east Ulster and Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, have produced some medieval glazed pottery, jewellery and weapons. However, these objects largely derived from brief, transitory phases of activity, rather than any long lived habitation.

Early modern crannogs: 1534-1700

Interestingly, there is now also emerging scientific dating evidence to support previous archaeological and historical indicators for crannog occupation in south Ulster and the northwest in the early modern period, such as in the sixteenth and seventeenth century (and even later).⁴⁶ Generally, it has been believed that this activity relates to the turbulent years of the Tudor wars, when Gaelic Irish lords resisted and struggled against

⁴³ The abundant historical and archaeological evidence for the late medieval re-activation and construction of crannogs has been summarised in O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 152-6; O'Sullivan, 'Crannogs in late medieval Gaelic Ireland', pp 401-9; See also K.D. O'Conor, *The archaeology of medieval rural settlement in Ireland* (Dublin, 1998), pp 238-42; K.D. O'Conor, 'The morphology of Gaelic lordly sites in north Connacht', in Duffy, D. Edwards and E. Fitzpatrick (eds.), *Gaelic Ireland: Land, lordship and settlement, c. 1250-c.1650* (Dublin, 2001), pp. 329-45; These were not all lordly sites, as there are also several excavated crannogs, particularly in south Ulster, that were apparently used as the dwellings of ordinary or poor people.

⁴⁴ Claire Foley and Brian Williams, 'Crannogs in County Fermanagh', unpublished manuscript, EHS, (Belfast nd); Brian Williams and Sarah Gormley *Archaeological objects from County Fermanagh* (Belfast, 2002), p. 17.

⁴⁵ O'Sullivan, 'Crannogs in late medieval Gaelic Ireland', p. 417

English governance and control. As in earlier periods, such crannogs may have been deliberately chosen as fortifications (apart from their practical suitability) because of the fact that they were symbolic or redolent of a Gaelic past, significant for a society that now saw its culture and practices under attack. Intriguingly, in English documents, there is a correspondingly strong cultural distaste and contempt for these 'crannocks' and 'houses upon lakes', so much so that commentators urged strongly that they be destroyed. The Irish annals, English contemporary descriptions and Richard Bartlett's pictorial maps all suggest that crannogs were variously used as military garrisons, prisons, hospitals, ammunition stores and as places to keep silver and gold plate. However, there is also some archaeological evidence, from small crannogs in Leitrim and Cavan in particular, that some crannog islets and marshland platforms were being used as seasonal dwellings, fishing platforms or indeed as ordinary habitations by the poor or socially outcast.⁴⁷

In conclusion, Stout's recent study of early medieval ringforts in Ireland was largely predicated on the idea that most ringforts visible in the landscape today were constructed and occupied within a tight dating range, between the seventh and the ninth century AD. He argued that as they were therefore contemporary sites, the spatial distribution of ringforts could then be used to model social organisation in the early medieval settlement landscape.⁴⁸ However, in the study of crannogs it is unlikely that we can so confident. In reality, while it is likely that most crannogs were primarily built and occupied in the early medieval period, this has to be argued out for each site and each lake. Fortunately, there are often useful clues to be gleaned from crannog morphology, historical references, dendrochronological and radiocarbon dates and the recovery of early medieval artefacts from their surfaces.

'Remembering': crannogs as symbols of the past in the early Middle Ages

Introduction

Crannogs were clearly built, occupied, left and returned to, throughout the early Middle Ages. On some sites (Rathinaun, Island MacHugh, Ballinderry 2, Moynagh Lough), there even appears to be a deliberate re-engagement with places that had effectively last been occupied in later prehistory. People in early medieval Ireland were fascinated by the past around them. In particular, the community's *senchas* ('traditional lore') provided its members with a vast array of information about long dead people, places

⁴⁶ O'Sullivan, 'Crannogs – places of resistance', pp 87-101.

⁴⁷ O'Sullivan, 'Crannogs in late medieval Gaelic Ireland', p. 417.

⁴⁸ Stout, *The Irish ringfort*, pp 24-31.

and events.⁴⁹ This *senchas* included origin legends, sagas and pseudo-historical tales, and regnal poems and genealogies that extolled the deeds of the community's past kings and queens. It could be used in the present for propaganda or to promote a political viewpoint, and it could also be renewed, subtly altered or even invented when needed.⁵⁰ The past and memory was hugely important too in early Irish law, and *senchas* was used to preserve knowledge of tribal boundaries, land inheritance rights within the kindred and other legal matters. In early medieval Ireland, such knowledge of the past could be communicated in various ways down the generations, through oral narratives, poems, manuscripts and inscription on stone, but it was also handed down by use of the landscape itself.

In particular, the early medieval *dinnseanchas* incorporated a detailed knowledge of topography and place. In the Irish *dinnseanchas*, preserved in eleventh and twelfth-century texts, various topographical features (i.e. hills, lakes, woods) as well as places of the human past (such as ancient burial mounds and abandoned dwelling places) provided a mnemonic trigger to remind a person of an anecdote about an historical or mythical memory about that place. Each anecdote could be used to explain its origin, history or form, but it could also be used to transmit political and ideological messages about the contemporary landscape. It is also evident that memories of the past were frequently included in saints lives, often to copperfasten a church's hold on a particular piece of land. It is clear then that early medieval communities used the past, and the physical traces of past people, to satisfy their own contemporary needs and aims. The best example of this is the way that the tribal *óenach* was frequently held at a prehistoric burial mound, or at a place that was believed to be one.⁵¹

Symbols of the past: the re-activation of prehistoric islets

It is clear from archaeological excavations that several early medieval crannogs were also directly built on knolls or islets that were the physical remains of long abandoned prehistoric sites. At Rathtinaun, Co. Sligo, the rich early medieval period III crannog (probably dating from the sixth or seventh century AD, judging from the presence of

⁴⁹ F.J. Byrne, 'Seanchas: the nature of Gaelic historical tradition' in J.G. Barry (ed.), *Historical Studies IX* (Belfast, 1974), pp 137-59.

⁵⁰ Edel Bhreathnach, 'Kings, the kingship of Leinster and the regnal poems of *laishenchas laigen*: a reflection of dynastic politics in leinster, 650-1150' in A.P. Smyth (ed.), *Seanchas: studies in early and medieval Irish archaeology, history and literature in honour of Francis J. Byrne* (Dublin, 2000), pp 299-312.

⁵¹ Aitchison, *Armagh and the royal centres in early medieval Ireland*, pp 50-121; Cathy Swift, 'Pagan monuments and Christian legal centres in early Meath' in *Ríocht na Midhe*, 11, no. 2 (1996), pp 1-26.

Merovingian glass bottles amongst the finds) was constructed on a site that had previously seen two main phases of Late Bronze Age activity (probably at about 900 BC). In the early medieval period, the older site would have appeared as a low, rounded ridge, almost certainly with cultural material exposed around its edges. The early medieval crannog builders laid stone across its surface, and Raftery even suspected that wooden piles from the Bronze Age settlement had been incorporated into the early medieval site, although this would have had to have been waterlogged wood from buried deposits.⁵² At Ballinderry No. 2, Co. Offaly, the ninth-century crannog was constructed directly on top of a site that had previously been used in the sixth century AD as an *elite* deer-hunting, hide and antler processing site, which itself was located directly on top of a Late Bronze Age lake settlement site.⁵³ Similarly, at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, the earliest phases of sixth or seventh century occupation were on top of hillocks that had been built up in the Late Bronze Age.⁵⁴ On none of these sites were there any traces of substantive Iron Age activity, so there is no question of any 'settlement continuity' being a factor in this re-use.

It is intriguing to think that each of these sites probably appeared in the early medieval period as shallows or as low grassy islets not covered by the surrounding lake marls. At Moynagh Lough, lake marls did not cover the Late Bronze Age site, so it probably stood up as shallows in the lake. In the early medieval period then, these prehistoric sites would probably have appeared as unusual hillocks rising from the lakebed, occasionally even having waterlogged wooden piles, bone, charcoal and ancient objects exposed around their eroded sides. The presence of these objects would have made them recognisably man-made places. It is worth remembering that if a thousand-year old crannog palisades can be seen in the landscape today, then people in the past would also have been able to point to similar black, waterlogged posts that were a thousand years old then. It is probable that people would have constructed some narratives to explain them, regarding them perhaps as dwellings of the ancestors, as ancient burial places or as magical or otherwise significant places in the local landscape.

Symbols of the past: the re-use of prehistoric flints, stone axes and metalwork

⁵² Rathtinaun Crannog 61 site archive, Dept. of Archaeology, UCD; Raftery, 'Lake dwellings in Ireland'; Raftery *Pagan Celtic Ireland*, pp 32-5.

⁵³ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog No. 2', pp 6-27; Newman, Ballinderry Lough, pp 68-80; Conor Newman, 'Ballinderry crannóg No. 2, Co. Offaly: the Later Bronze Age' in *J. Ir. Archaeol*, 8 (1997), 91-100.

⁵⁴ Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' (1991), p. 12-13 ; Bradley, 'Living at the water's edge', pp 24-26.

It is also interesting that prehistoric objects (e.g. bronzes, stone axes, flint arrowheads, and scrapers) are also commonly found on early medieval crannogs. It can be difficult, particularly on the sites investigated by antiquarians, to decide whether prehistoric artefacts were actually found in early medieval occupation contexts, or were in fact deeper down in the stratigraphy, perhaps from an original Neolithic or Bronze Age occupation horizon. For example, a crannog cairn, 25-30m in diameter at Monaltyduff, on Monalty Lough, Co. Monaghan produced an array of eighth to tenth century artefacts (e.g. ringed pins, conical-headed, disc-headed, and knob-headed pins, iron scramasax knives, a Viking sword, spindle whorls, iron spearhead, quemstones), as well as post-medieval weapons. Remarkably, the same site has also produced a collection of Late Bronze Age objects, including two socketed bronze daggers, a tanged dagger, a tanged razor, a bag-shaped chape, a bronze gouge, a fleshhook handle and possibly two rings.⁵⁵ Similarly, a crannog cairn at Drummond Otra, on Loughnaglack, Co. Monaghan produced a distinctively early medieval assemblage of ring pins, disc-headed and knob-headed pins, an iron axe, iron ploughshares, bone pins, strike-a-lights, glass bracelets and a bronze harp-key. It also produced a collection of Bronze Age objects, including an Early Bronze Age halberd, a Late Bronze Age socketed bronze axe, three bronze daggers and a bronze ring.⁵⁶ Both of these collections could indicate a (spectacularly rich) Late Bronze Age activity phase on these sites. They could conceivably also have been gathered together there by an early medieval community and brought onto an island, or even picked up and moved around on the same island. Late Bronze Age swords have also been found on undated crannog surfaces at Bohermeen, Co. Meath and on the plank floor of a crannog at Furnish, Co. Tyrone.⁵⁷ At Lagore, there is a range of Early Bronze Age objects, including a bronze dagger,⁵⁸ a socketed bronze spearhead⁵⁹ and a carved wooden figure, although these most probably derived from a prehistoric layer beneath the early medieval crannog, or alternatively from elsewhere in the bog at Lagore.⁶⁰ At sites like Ballinderry Lough and Lagore crannog, Co. Meath, there is an ambivalence

⁵⁵ The site was exposed during drainage operations in 1844, revealing a canoe and an artificial island with the 'remains of piles and transverse portions of timber'; E.P. Shirley, 'On crannogs, and remains discovered in them' *Arch. Jn.*, 3 (1846), pp 44-49; A.T. Lucas, 'National Museum of Ireland: Archaeological acquisitions in the year 1965' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.* 98, (1968), pp 93-154; George Eogan, *Hoards of the Irish Later Bronze Age* (Dublin, 1983); Brindley, *Monaghan*, p. 16

⁵⁶ The Loughnaglack crannog was exposed during the 1844 drainage operations as an island of stones, bones and large piles of timber; Shirley, 'On crannogs, and remains discovered in them', pp 44-49; Lucas, 'Archaeological acquisitions in the year 1965', pp. 93-154; Brindley, *Monaghan*, p. 15

⁵⁷ George Eogan, *Catalogue of Irish bronze swords* (Dublin, 1965), p. 85

⁵⁸ George Eogan, 'A bronze double-edged knife-dagger with openwork handle and ring terminal from Lagore, Co. Meath and its affinities' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 96, (1966), pp 147-156.

⁵⁹ Hencken, 'Lagore', p. 58.

⁶⁰ B.J. Coles, 'Anthropomorphic wooden figures from Britain and Ireland' in *Proc. Prehist. Soc.*, 56 (1996), pp 315-333.

then, given the massive disturbance of these sites by diggings in the nineteenth century, prior to Hencken's excavations in the 1930s.

However, there are several other early medieval crannogs that have produced prehistoric objects from apparently within their occupation horizons. At Moylurg, Co. Antrim, a crannog enclosed within a substantial wooden palisade had a large early medieval artefact assemblage, including an eighth to ninth-century decorated bronze ladle, possibly used as a wine strainer, a pennanular brooch and early medieval souterrain ware. Other finds from this probable high-status early medieval crannog included a Neolithic stone axe, flint scrapers and a hollow base arrowhead found on a spread of ash and bone at the centre of the site. Although, the site was badly dug and the stratigraphy is unclear, these objects seem to have been recovered from an early medieval occupation horizon.⁶¹ At Rathinaun, Lough Gara, Co. Sligo, most of the early medieval occupation phases (e.g. Period III, IV, VI, VII) also produced stone axes, flint scrapers and flakes, occasionally placed within house floors.⁶² However, the incidence of prehistoric objects is not limited to high-status sites. At Clea Lakes, Co. Down, the early medieval crannog occupation deposits produced a flint thumbnail scraper and even Mesolithic Bann flakes.⁶³ At Lough Faughan, Co. Down, flints were recovered from the early medieval occupation levels, mostly small, naturally-fractured and much bruised pieces found in the vicinity of hearths that had evidently been used as strike-a-lights. However, there were also some carefully flaked prehistoric implements (also bruised), including two end-scrapers and a leaf-shaped arrowhead.⁶⁴ At Craigywarren, Co. Antrim, prehistoric flint flakes, a concave scraper, an arrowhead and a fragment of a stone axe were found in the occupation level. The scraper was found beside the site's hearth, while the broken stone axe appeared to have been re-used as an anvil.⁶⁵ Most recently, Sroove crannog, Lough Gara, Co. Sligo produced an Neolithic chert arrowhead, clearly *in-situ* on an early medieval house floor layer beside the fire.

Understanding the past in early medieval Ireland and the role of crannogs

The occurrence of these 'odd deposits' can be interpreted in several ways. Although traditionally interpreted as artefacts that had been accidentally scooped up in building material, this seems an unlikely explanation given that such items are also very

⁶¹ Buick 'The crannog of Moylurg', (1893), pp. 27-43 ; Buick, 'The crannog of Moylurg', (1894), pp 316-331.

⁶² Rathinaun Crannog 61 site archive, Dept. of Archaeology, UCD.

⁶³ Collins and Proudfoot, 'Clea Lakes crannóg', pp 92-101.

⁶⁴ Collins, 'Lough Faughan crannog', p. 69, Fig. 10.

⁶⁵ Coffey, 'Craigywarren crannog', pp 113-114.

commonly found on ringforts, unenclosed dwellings and even within early medieval houses. It is striking that the most trustworthy 'early' finds from early medieval crannogs are of stone, typically being stone axes, flint arrowheads, scrapers and flakes. People could have been picking them up around lakeshores, in riverbeds, and undoubtedly in the places that they are found today - the plough-soil of agricultural fields. It is possible that they saw them as 'antiquarian' objects, recognising that they were deliberately shaped and worked ancient stones, to be associated with mythical past people or long dead ancestors.

They may also have seen them as 'thunderbolts', 'elf-stones' or 'fairy darts', and used their magical properties to protect food or to repel rats, or to prevent catastrophic fire inside the dwelling.⁶⁶ It is certainly interesting that these objects were also used and curated beside the fireside on early medieval ringforts and crannogs. Although they certainly had a practical use, as most of them were bruised and were probably used (along with other early medieval struck flint) as strike-a-lights to light the fire. Nevertheless, a symbolic association between arrowheads ('thunderbolts'), thunderstorm lightning (a real danger on an elevated island on water) and fires could have led people to keep an arrowhead in the house to protect it and its inhabitants. Flint arrowheads and pebbles were seen in modern Irish folklore as 'witch-stones' having magical properties that could protect cattle, milk and butter. Cattle that were not thriving were reckoned to have been 'elf-shot'. A cow-doctor called to a stable would carry a few flint arrowheads to whip out of the animal's body at the right moment so as to cure it.⁶⁷ There may then also have been an association to be made between these objects, the hearth and the household's food.

It may also be suggested that the occasional building of crannogs on earlier, abandoned sites may be a deliberate re-activation of places associated with the past, and their use in the present, and not merely a practical choice of slightly elevated places to start laying timber and mounding up stones. There is plenty of evidence to show that early medieval communities actively used places redolent in myth, the classic examples being the 'royal' sites at Tara and Emain Macha, the former reputedly used for the inauguration of kings. However, dwelling places and residences were used this way too. At Clogher, Co.

⁶⁶ Peter Carelli, 'Thunder and lightning, magical miracles. On the popular myth of thunderbolts and the presence of Stone Age artefacts in Medieval deposits' in H. Andersson, P. Carelli and L. Ersgård (eds.), *Visions of the past: Trends and traditions in Swedish medieval archaeology* (Lund, 1997), pp 393-417; It is also possible that sharply pointed arrowheads and scrapers were used to carve and finish early medieval bone pins; Jim Boyle, pers. comm.

⁶⁷ Estyn Evans, *Irish folkways* (London, 1957), pp 303-3.

Tyrone, an Iron Age hillfort and barrow cemetery was clearly used again as an early medieval royal residence and inauguration site, with extensive evidence for metalworking, trade and crafts.

On early medieval crannogs, the re-use of an ancient site (whose existence was perhaps explained in the local *sénchas* by an anecdote about past events or incidents) could have provided its inhabitants with an authenticated prestige and status. This might have been particularly important after periods of population movement or political change. For example, Bradley has suggested that at Moynagh Lough, the crannog may have been built up in the seventh century by the Mugdorna, a tribal group who had recently moved southwards onto a dangerous political boundary between Brega and Airgialla. The site may have been chosen by them precisely because it had significant associations in local folklore, and by so doing, they appropriated and exploited these local perceptions of the site's past.⁶⁸

Another potential way of thinking about this early medieval use of ancient islets is to remember the fascination this society had with its pagan past. I have already argued, in Chapter 4 above, that islands were sometimes seen as places where the pagan otherworld could be encountered. In particular, travellers to islands could expect to encounter ways of life that were somewhat outside the norm. Such ideas may have been used to provide the owners or inhabitants of a crannog with both a measure of social distance and a personal association with past mythical events at that place.

'Lifecycles': site maintenance practices, renewal and alteration

Introduction

However, it is worth pointing out that crannogs often indicate an interest in the past *within* the early medieval period, as well as referring backwards to prehistoric sites. The lifecycle and longevity of use of crannogs speaks of rhythms of renewal, re-activation and expansion. Many early medieval crannogs show archaeological evidence for multiple phases of reconstruction, re-use and re-building over potentially hundreds of years. Firstly, this is quite evident in the deep, multi-layered stratigraphy of many sites. However this stratigraphy does not represent a long-term accretion of settlement deposits, but the fact that crannog surfaces were periodically re-sodded, built up and reconstructed, while palisades and enclosing features were often re-erected using different materials, roundwood posts, planks or stone kerbs. On some sites, it meant that the

⁶⁸ John Bradley, 'Archaeological excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' in T. Kabdebo and C.

crannog's height was quickly and substantially added to by means of a overlying layer of soil and stone. This can be seen at early medieval crannogs such as Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon, where it perhaps indicated a reconstruction and walling towards the end of the early Middle Ages. Dendrochronological and radiocarbon dating also indicates that crannogs were re-built, often over a period of several centuries. In the north midlands, this is most clearly evident at sites such as Cróinis, Co. Westmeath and Tonymore North, Co. Longford, where both ninth-century and twelfth-century activity can be identified in the sequence of palisading.

Such multi-phase or sequences of re-building have been identified on crannogs of different social from high-status royal or noble dwellings (e.g. Moynagh Lough, Rathtinaun, Lagore, Ballinderry No. 2), to medium-sized sites probably inhabited by modest households (e.g. Lough Faughan, Clea Lakes), as well as those smaller sites inhabited by poor people (e.g. Sroove, Co. Sligo). At Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, there were at least six phases of occupation in the early medieval period, each represented by a built-up layer of redeposited peat across the islands surface. The island thus shifted in shape and became larger (being typically 40 EW, by 32m NS) as it was renewed and altered across its life-span. In contrast, at Sroove, a small crannog cairn on the shores of Lough Gara was also re-surfaced and re-occupied on several occasions between the seventh and the tenth century AD. This also signalled occasional changes in its use, with its final phase after c.AD 1000 being represented by a stony layer of fire-cracked stones and metalworking slag. So, re-building is something that occurs on crannogs associated with all social classes in the community, i.e. nobles, farmers and labourers. It indicates a high degree of site maintenance practices, as well as the level of constant work need to keep a site intact and in a habitable condition.

Lifecycles – continuity and change?

It is worth noting that this buildup of multiple sequences of occupation layers, as well as a complex series of structures indicating periodic re-building of houses, also occurs on many early medieval ringforts and cashels, over perhaps 2-3 major phases. It is generally taken to indicate a long-term continuity of habitation, an inevitable consequence of people living on the same mucky surface across time, building up middens, abandoned house structures and other features literally under their feet. However, on some sites, it appears to have happened quite quickly. At Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim, a raised rath was built up (between AD 680-1000) by six phases of re-building, each usually begun by

Morash (eds.), *Maynooth University Record 2000* (Maynooth 2000), pp 31-7, at p. 35.

the knocking down of the old house, the insertion of a layer of clay or stone, followed by re-building of houses on this introduced surface. The earliest ringfort settlement at c. AD 700 was a simple univallate rath with five roundhouses, open-area workshops, an entrance ramp and internal pathways. At later stages, in the ninth century, it became a high platform ringfort or raised rath, with an elevated dwelling area overlooking the surrounding land.⁶⁹ Interestingly, there is also some evidence from high-precision radiocarbon dating that some of the consecutive houses in the lower waterlogged levels were built during a 'tight' window of 72 years, being rebuilt every 10 years.⁷⁰ Deer Park Farms may have been rebuilt quite quickly, rather than over a long period. Certainly, on other sites, there appears to have been a deliberate attempt to raise the surface quickly. Thence, at the platform ringfort of Rathmullan, Co. Down, there were about four stages of occupation between the eighth and twelfth century AD. In the twelfth century, the site's ideological or symbolic power was appropriated by Anglo-Norman colonists, who topped it up and turned it into a motte.⁷¹

Longevities – continuous or episodic?

So, a long duration of activity is not the same as continuous, uninterrupted activity. True, there is good stratigraphical, artefactual and dating evidence for occupation on some crannogs over significantly long periods of time, up to 200-300 years. For example, at Moynagh Lough there were probably six phases of early medieval activity, over a period of 200 years, between the late sixth and the close of the eighth century. It is also typically suggested that Ballinderry crannog No. 2 was occupied in both the sixth and the ninth centuries AD, while Ballinderry No. 1 had several phases of occupation in the tenth and eleventh century. Similarly, Lagore is often seen as having a long history of use between the sixth to the eleventh century. Similar lengthy durations of habitation can also be seen on small, poorer crannogs such as Sroove, Co. Sligo where there is stratigraphical and dating evidence for occupation between the late seventh and the tenth centuries AD. This may well be true, and many other sites have certainly produced good artefactual dating evidence for occupation at different times during these centuries.

However, this does not mean that these occupation-histories were continuous. In fact, it is likely that we should be considering much more brief and dynamic histories of dwelling

⁶⁹ C.J. Lynn, 'Deer Park Farms' in *Current Archaeology*, 113 (1987), pp 193-8; C.J. Lynn, 'Early medieval houses' in Michael Ryan (ed.), *The illustrated archaeology of Ireland* (Dublin, 1991), pp 126-31.

⁷⁰ Baillie, *A slice through time*, p. 71.

⁷¹ C.J. Lynn, 'The excavation of Rathmullan, a raised rath and motte in Co. Down' in *U.J.A.*, 44-5 (1981-82), pp 65-171; O'Keeffe, *Medieval Ireland*, p. 22.

– namely long years of abandonment interspersed with short periods of life and human presence. The most dramatic evidence for this has been recently provided by the excavation and close dendrochronological dating of a crannog at Buiston, at Ayrshire, in southwest Scotland.⁷² This was a classic crannog in the Irish mould, built of timbers across an artificial mound of organic deposits, producing an array of artefacts associated with dairying, tillage, metalworking and exotic trade. When the site chronology was established using radiocarbon assays, it appeared that it had initially been constructed in the first/second century AD, with the building of houses in the fourth to fifth centuries AD, followed by the construction of a palisade in the late sixth/early seventh centuries AD. This had all the appearance of a site occupied over a long time period. In contrast, when various parts of the site were dated by dendrochronology, a surprisingly dynamic picture emerged. The site had indeed been initially built in the first/second century AD. However, thereafter most of the construction and occupation activities occurred within quite a tight period in the late sixth/early seventh century (AD 589-630).⁷³ Defensive palisades and walkways were unstable, prone to collapsing when the crannog slumped outwards. More surprisingly again, the houses inhabited on the site were short-lived structures indeed, needing constant repair and refurbishment, before their collapse. In Phase III, House A, built in AD 589, may have lasted for only 6 years, and its hearth and door was replaced every two years. In Phase IV, House B, built in 594, lasted for 20 years (but was certainly out of use in 27 years), but its hearth and floors were replaced every 5 years. There were even significant periods of enforced abandonment, indicated by flooding events when rising lake levels or sediment slumping caused aquatic insects to be spread by water across the site. Ultimately, the site was abandoned by the mid-seventh century AD. It appears that Buiston crannog was not a long-lived site, although it was certainly a place that people tried to keep alive. Faced with frequent slumping and collapse, its inhabitants often tried to reconstruct it, by gathering old timbers and infilling hollows, by re-building palisades, and by re-building and re-using their houses.

Similar patterns of rapid re-building can be identified on Irish crannogs. At Island MacHugh, on Lough Catherine, Co. Tyrone, an early medieval crannog may have been a stronghold of the Uí Fiachrach Arda Sratha, a subservient tuath of either the Cenél Conaill or the Cenél nEogain in the seventh century.⁷⁴ The island was excavated by

⁷² Crone, *The history of a Scottish lowland crannog*, p. 48-58.

⁷³ The radiocarbon dates were essentially incorrect, due to the statistical problems with calibrating dates at this era.

⁷⁴ Warner, 'On crannogs and kings', p.67-8.

Oliver Davies and subsequently by Ivens *et al.*⁷⁵ During these latter excavations, the site was sampled extensively for dendrochronological purposes, producing a range of 'felling dates' for palisade timbers that had bark and sapwood intact (indicating that the wood clearly had not been stockpiled, as bark quickly falls off seasoned wood, or is consumed by beetles and wood-rotting organisms). This showed that trees had been felled for the crannog at AD 601, 602, 603, 608, 611, 614 and 619. This is clear evidence for a sequence of building and re-building, every few years, over a total period of 19 years.⁷⁶

There are various ways of interpreting this dynamic sequence of re-building at Island MacHugh. It may simply have been due to subsidence. After the crannog builders first erected a timber circle and infilled it with a mass of peat and stones, slumping of the mound meant that they had to drive more and more vertical timbers down around its edges to try and retain it. However, it is also possible that the 'act' of re-building of what may have been a community stronghold (a lordly site) was something that was done for social or ideological reasons. One of the paradoxical things about the Island MacHugh crannog is that it appears not to have been permanently occupied. There is little domestic or other artefactual evidence from the site, suggesting that it was only a seasonal or temporary dwelling or defensive refuge. Therefore, the re-building events may have been a deliberate and regular maintenance activity that was reaffirming the political right of the local community to dwell there, creating a permanence of place that did not in reality exist.

In conclusion, the multi-period reuse of crannogs within the early Middle Ages strongly suggests a persistence of returning, an interest in coming back to places previously abandoned or empty, or occasionally a concern to maintain a place associated with the *fine* (kin-group) or the *túath*.

'Forgetting': site destruction, abandonment and desertion

Introduction

As much as crannogs were returned to in the early medieval period then, they were also self-evidently abandoned and forgotten. There came a moment when the nature of a site's use changes from a continuous or intense one, to something that is more transitory, sporadic and temporary. Indeed, there are some crannogs that appeared to have been occupied for only brief periods of time, perhaps only a single phase of habitation lasting 10-15 years. At Loughmore (Bofenaun), Co. Mayo, a small crannog

⁷⁵ Davies, *Excavations at Island MacHugh*; Ivens *et al.*, 'Excavations at Island MacHugh', pp 99-103.

revetted with posts and surfaced with a single layer of flagstone was used as an iron-working site. It was built at c. AD 804 ± 9 years, but thereafter abandoned. There is no evidence for any previous deeper deposits on the site, and none for any activity afterwards.⁷⁷ Similarly, at Craigywarren, Co. Antrim, a small sixth to seventh-century crannog seems to have been occupied for only one generation. The foundations of timber, peat and gravel were originally neatly surfaced, but seemingly never refurbished.⁷⁸

Site abandonment and desertion appears to happen on different crannogs and in different regions at different times. In the north midlands, most crannogs seem to have been abandoned by the end of the early Middle Ages. For example, Moynagh Lough was probably abandoned by the close of the eighth century, while Lagore was apparently abandoned by the eleventh century. Subsequent activities in the late Middle Ages were brief, involving the deposition of coins, glazed pottery, weapons and tools, but little indicating a long-term occupation. In contrast, other crannogs continue to be used in some way, at least in south Ulster and the northwest, well into the thirteenth, fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, although there is no site as yet that has produced a rich late medieval artefact assemblage. For example, at Ardakillen crannog, Co. Roscommon, there is a large assemblage of early medieval artefacts from the site, but despite the fact that there are late medieval annalistic references to activity there, there are few relatively late medieval objects known from it.

Reasons for abandonment

There must have been many reasons why crannogs were abandoned in the early medieval period. It is worth remembering that crannogs are structures precariously placed on unstable, man-made mounds of sludge and stones, and are therefore prone to slipping and even sudden collapse. It is also worth stating that crannogs would have been unusually exposed to destructive environmental conditions (annual flooding, high winds and waves during storms would have wrought significant damage on houses, walls and surfaces that would have suffered less if they were on dryland). An early medieval roundhouse built on a crannog had its wall posts and roof-supporting timbers set between a perpetually waterlogged sediment and the open air, a context that dramatically reduces a timber's lifespan and load bearing capacities. It is unlikely that it could have stood without repair for longer than 20-30 years, if even that. It is interesting that on many of the largest

⁷⁶ Baillie, *A slice through time*, p. 61; Warner, 'On crannogs and kings', p. 67.

⁷⁷ Keane, 'Lough More, Co. Mayo', pp 167-82

⁷⁸ Coffey, 'Craigywarren crannog'.

crannogs in Westmeath (e.g. Coolure Demesne 1. Appendix 2), there is a particular part of the island that seems to be deliberately higher than any other, a type of raised platform overlooking the rest of the island (18m EW by 9m NS, by 2m in height). It is possible this upper platform was used to store some items on during the winter, well above any expected risen water levels.

There are also a few annalistic entries that describe the destruction of crannogs during storms. These are obviously part of the tradition of recording such natural phenomena as snowstorms, great winds, storms and cattle murrains in the Irish annals.⁷⁹ Beyond noting them, early Irish historians have generally paid them little attention. However, Cunningham and Gillespie, dealing with late medieval entries, have recently suggested that such phenomena might have been intended as moralistic references to contemporary historical, social and political events, indicating divine providence and judgement.⁸⁰ Anyway, that early medieval crannogs could be occasionally destroyed or badly damaged during bad weather can be seen by a few annalistic references to great windstorms that ruined lake islands. In the *Annals of Ulster*, there is the following entry for AD 857.

Uentus maximus co rala fidhar co comscar innsi locha
A great windstorm caused a destruction of trees and ruined lake islands.⁸¹

Similarly in AD 990, the *Annals of the Four Masters* also refer to a great wind that destroyed the royal crannog of the king of Connacht, on Lough Cime (Lough Hackett, Co. Galway).

An ghaeth do shlucadh insi Locha Cimbe co h-oband i n-aon-uair, cona dreich 7 somnach .i. trichat traighedh.
The wind sunk the island of Loch Cimbe suddenly, with its surface and palisade, i.e. thirty feet.⁸²

However, crannogs are also frequently referred to as being sacked during warfare, being burnt, levelled, plundered or otherwise damaged. These references are not always unambivalent, as they will usually just refer to the destruction of a fortress on a lake, or even just to destruction of the lake itself, although in the case it is probably implicit that

⁷⁹ Ian Cantwell, 'Climate change and the Gaelic annals', in Michele Comber (ed.), *Association of Young Irish Archaeologists: proceedings of annual conference* (Galway, 1998), pp 25-34.

⁸⁰ Bernadette Cunningham and Raymond Gillespie, *Stories from Gaelic Ireland: microhistories from the sixteenth-century Irish annals* (Dublin, 2003), pp 134-54.

⁸¹ *A.U.* 857.5.

⁸² *A.F.M.* 990.7; I translate the word *dreich* here as 'surface', and the word *sonnach* as 'palisade'.

it was a crannog.⁸³ The destructions of such islands typically occur as a part of a general major raid across a territory, although occasionally the annalists will make it clear that islands were being picked out as being worthy of particular aggressive attention. It might be thought that this was because crannogs were perceived as places where wealth was being stored. However, they may also have been seen destroyed because they were somewhat symbolic of a tribal identity or loyalty, rather in the way that sacred trees were occasionally felled as an insult.

A few annalistic entries from the ninth, tenth and the eleventh century will briefly suffice to give a sense of how these destructions of islands are written about.

833

Oggain Locha Bricberna for Conghalach m nEchdach 7 a marbad oc longaibh iarum

Loch Bricrenn was plundered to the detriment of Congalach son of Echaid, and he was killed afterwards at the ships.⁸⁴

961

Ni nemh-ghnath do dhénamh lasin righ Domhnall, mac Muirchertaigh .i. longa do breith dar Dabhall, tar Sliabh Fuait co Loch n-Aindind, co ro h-oircedh oiléna an locha lais.

An unusual thing was done by the King Domhnall, son of Muircheartach; namely he brought fleets over Dabhall, and across Sliabh Fuaid, to Loch Ainninn, so that the islands of the lakes were plundered by him.⁸⁵

984

Maoil Sechlaim, mac Domhnaill, do indredh Connacht, 7 do thoghail a n-innsedh, 7 do mharbhadh a t-toiseach, & do-radadh Magh n-Aoi h-i luaithredh lais. Creach fo a la mhodh lá Connachtaibh co Loch n-Aindind, co ro

Máelseachlainn, son of Domhnall, plundered Connaught, destroyed its islands, and killed its chieftains, and reduced Magh-Aei to ashes. A depredation was committed by the Connaughtmen, in retaliation, as far as Loch-Ainninn.⁸⁶

1026

Slogad la Flaithbertach H. Neill in Midhe co tuc giallu 7 co ndechaid for leic aigrídh in nInis Mochat coro innir.

Flaithbertach Ua Néill led an expedition into Mide and took hostages, and crossed to Inis Mochat over the thick ice and ravaged it.⁸⁷

⁸³ For example, *A.U.* 802.8, *Toghal Locha Riach la Muirghus* ('Destruction of Loch Riach by Muirghus'). This was most probably one of the crannogs on Loughrea, Co. Galway, but it could of course have simply been a reference to a fortress on the dryland.

⁸⁴ *A.U.* 833.12; This is a possible reference to an attack on the early medieval crannog at Loughbrickland, Co. Down, where a crannog in the modern lake is now surmounted by a Union Jack every July 12th. The site was also clearly occupied in the sixteenth century; Lett, 'The island in Lough Bricklan', pp. 249-254.

⁸⁵ *A.F.M.* 961.7; This is a reference to an attack on the crannogs on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath, which were politically significant residences of the tenth-century Clann Cholmáin and Fir Tulach kings of Mide.

⁸⁶ *A.F.M.* 984.5

⁸⁷ *A.U.* 1026.2; This was at Inismoty, Co. Meath; In the same year, there were also expeditions by Brian's son into Mide and Brega against 'foreigners' (Hiberno-Norse), the Laigin and the Osraige, while Eochaid's son also led an expedition against the 'foreigners'.

It is also worth remembering that the destruction of an island did not lead to its abandonment. In AD 850, the *Annals of Ulster* state that

Cinaed son of Conaing, king of Cianacht, rebelled against Mael Sechnaill with the support of the foreigners, and plundered the Uí Néill from the Sinann to the sea, both churches and states, and he deceitfully sacked the island of Loch Gabor, levelling it to the ground, (*coro ort innsi Locha Gabur dolose corbo comardd fria lar*) and the oratory of Treóit, with seventy people in it, was burned by him.⁸⁸

This crannog, the royal site of the SílnÁedo Sláine kings of Brega was attacked again in AD 935, when the *Annals of Ulster* state that

The island of Loch Gabor was sacked (*Inis Locha Gabhar do thogail*) by Amlaíb grandson of Ímar. The cave of Cogba was sacked in the same week.⁸⁹

In other words, the fact that Lagore crannog, Co. Meath was apparently sacked on several occasions in the early Middle Ages in itself implies that it was re-built after each attack. On other occasions, local drastic political developments, such as the collapse of a dynasty or murder of a ruling king could have led to islands being abandoned.

However, there are a range of other reasons why crannogs could have been ultimately abandoned. Dwellings have lifecycles, they are built, deteriorate and collapse. So, like people, they are born, grow old and die. On occasion, this seems to be related to the over-exploitation of local resources or shifts in demographics.⁹⁰ However, households also change, they expand and contract as children are born, young people move away or elderly parents die. In some societies, there can be a strong symbolic association between the life of a house and the life of the people that dwell within it. Therefore, at the death of a person who is most strongly associated with it (a grandmother, say), there can be an act of abandonment, and the house may even be burnt down. Ethnographic studies also reveal that houses and dwellings can also be abandoned for various other reasons, sometimes as part of the normal rhythm of settlement mobility, on other occasions as the result of an unusual or disturbing occurrence in the community.⁹¹ This could include

⁸⁸ *A.U.* 850.3.

⁸⁹ *A.U.* 935.4

⁹⁰ Recent dendrochronological studies of Neolithic and Bronze Age lake villages in southern Germany and Switzerland reveal surprisingly dynamic patterns of site abandonment, with quite large settlements being occupied for not much more than 20-30 years; John Coles and Bryony Coles, *Enlarging the past. The contribution of wetland archaeology*. (Edinburgh, 1996), pp 30-9.

⁹¹ C.M. Cameron and S.A. Tomka (eds.) *Abandonment of settlements and regions: ethnoarchaeological and archaeological approaches* (Cambridge, 1993) provides a range of regional and site-oriented studies of the processes involved in settlement abandonment.

the 'bad death' (murder, violent death, sudden sickness) of a significant member of a household or the belief that a dangerous malady (e.g. the plagues of the Irish annals) was present on the settlement. On the early medieval Scottish crannog at Buiston, in Ayrshire, there is evidence that there was an infestation of flies caused by a build up of human waste and rotting meat, perhaps an indicator that people had stopped cleaning the site as its perceived lifespan drew to a close.⁹²

End of history?

In any case, when an early medieval crannog was abandoned, it would quickly have deteriorated. The houses would have collapsed inwards, the palisades would have slumped, rotted and broken and the cairn would have shifted with the waves across the lakebed. After a period, the organic-rich soil on the upper occupation surface would have become biologically active again, weeds and grasses would have colonised the sites, followed by trees and bushes.⁹³ Most crannogs in the modern landscape, especially those that are a little more elevated above the water-line, appear as tree-clad islands, remote from grazing cattle and sheep, and thence liable to become overgrown. In fact, although many early medieval crannogs show evidence for periodic occupation in the late Middle Ages and early modern period, they must often simply appear to be natural islands. Indeed, even within the early medieval period, a few decades of abandonment would have led to sites simply appearing as natural islands, no different than any other around a lake, raising again the point about the early medieval Irish not distinguishing between natural and built islands. Still, people would still have been able to see rotting wooden piles poking out of the water, middens of bone spread across stony surfaces, and would perhaps have remembered them as ancient habitations. In Westmeath, the Newtownlow crannog had been abandoned, probably in the eleventh century AD. In the twelfth or early thirteenth century AD, it was briefly re-occupied or used in some way, possibly by an Anglo-Norman community, who deposited medieval pottery, a stirrup ring, a copper

⁹² Insect studies from Buiston indicate the presence of large amounts of fly puparia on some occupation levels, meaning that people would have had to endure great swarms of house-flies thriving on the rotting floor vegetation. In fact, conditions in its late sixth-century house (A) could have been so unpleasant that it may have been *the reason* why people left (although the flies could equally be a *result* rather than a *cause* of its abandonment). People would probably have suffered from maggots and fly-borne skin diseases. In contrast, the fly populations were very healthy indeed (thank you very much) with only a 0.7 per cent mortality of unhatched eggs; Peter Skidmore, 'The fly puparia', in Crone, *The history of a Scottish lowland crannog*, pp 101-102.

⁹³ There is good palaeoenvironmental evidence (i.e. from beetles, macroplant fossils, and soils) for the impact of such periods of abandonment on Buiston; see Coralie Mills, 'Buiston and environmental studies', in Crone, *The history of a Scottish lowland crannog*, pp 162-164. Similarly, in the early medieval crannog at Rathtinaun, Co. Sligo, a dark layer of soil, 10-15cm thick, developed from natural vegetation and humus, before the site was re-occupied in Period VI; Rathtinaun Crannog 61 site archive, Dept. of Archaeology, UCD (see also Appendix 3).

alloy plaque and a jet cross on the site. Probably we should interpret this use as a re-activation, or the re-invention of the crannog as place of the past, to be used again in the present.

Islands apart: the architecture and insularity of crannogs

Introduction

To an outside observer standing on the shore, a crannog may have seemed enigmatic, remote, and distant. Seen from across the water, the island would have been highly visible and distinctive, yet difficult to see into. People standing on the shoreline or approaching it by boat could have seen a low island, perhaps enclosed within a wooden palisade shining in the sunlight. Above the palisade, the thatched roofs of its dwellings would have been barely visible. The smoke of domestic hearths would have drifted across the island. The talk and chatter of the inhabitants within would have carried across the water to the shore, but the island remained distant. In a sense then, crannogs are places that enable people to remove themselves from view, places where they can achieve a measure of 'social distance' from others.

Early medieval crannog architecture could have been used in various ways to communicate and negotiate the social identities of its inhabitants. Of primary importance was the site's visual impact, both in terms of its architecture and the distances it could be seen from. Building the crannog in a place where it could be seen from a neighbouring shoreline or from across a lake, enabled its inhabitants to be in full view to the community. Building it in a particular location could also provide its occupants with views out to the land and surrounding settlement and landscape. The site's shape, diameter, enclosed area and height were also significant features, size in particular seem to have been one means of signalling power and status early medieval Ireland. The enclosing features of the site, the use of stone kerbs or wooden palisades, also enabled people to bound social space and to control what people could, or could not, see within the site. Finally, the relative accessibility of the site could be managed by situating it either close to the shoreline (where a causeway could be used to reach it) or by placing it at some distance from land, in deep water, so that it could only be reached by boat. In this section, I will explore the realities involved in the building and maintaining of crannogs, and the reasons for the differences in their size, location, architectural form and external appearance.

The building of a crannog as an event in the community

Historical evidence

In early Irish historical sources, particularly the saints' lives and annals, the building of a crannog was occasionally seen as an event worthy of recording, along with all the deaths of kings and abbots, battles and other events. This may have been because observers would have seen the building of an island fortification on a regional or local territorial boundary as a politically strategic defensive or aggressive act. On other occasions, the construction of an island may have been seen as a feat of architecture, indicating the status, wealth and power of the individual or community involved. Indeed, the practical task itself, the gathering of raw materials and placing of them on a lakebed, would have been a memorable event for all the community. The days, weeks and months of communal labour required in the building of a crannog would have lived on in local folklore.

The earliest documentary reference to the building of a crannog appears to be in an early seventh-century poem, included in the entry for AD 606 in the *Annals of the Four Masters*. It refers to the death of Áed, son of Colgu (who died in AD 610, according to the *Annals of Ulster*), king of Ind Airthir (a people located in the area of Co. Armagh), and over-king of the Airgialla (a politically significant dynasty across south Ulster).⁹⁴ The poem reads as follows:

Aodh, mac Colgan, toisech Airghiall & na n-Airther archena, d'écc, ina oilithre h-i c-Cluain Mic Nois. As dó do ráidheadh :

*1. Ro bai tan
ba lind ordan Loch Da Damh
Ní bui an loch acht ba h-ordan
h-i flaith Aodha, mic Colgan.*

*2. Cuma damhnadh muir
cara ro-dam-cur
Cebé fo-cer trilis treabh
tré inis Locha Da Dam*

Aedh, son of Colgan, chief of Oirghialla and of all the Airtheara, died on his pilgrimage, at Cluain Mic Nois. Of him was said:

1. There was a time
when Loch Da Damh was a pool of splendour,
The lake was *nothing else* but splendour
in the reign of Aedh, son of Colgan.

2. Indifferent to me who destroyed it;
my friend has abandoned it;
Though it was he that placed a brilliant house

⁹⁴ Warner, 'On crannogs and kings', p. 61.

upon the island of Loch Da Damh.⁹⁵

In any case, the poem clearly refers to the building of a house on an island at some time in the seventh century, perhaps during Áed's reign, or after his death by his successor. The idea that a king was responsible for the building of a house on an island is another aspect of the strong link between crannogs and kings in early medieval Ireland.

In the early eighth-century the *Annals of Ulster* refer to the construction (in AD 703), and then just over a decade later, the destruction (in AD 714) of an island known as *Ailén Daingen* (literally 'island fortress'). Interestingly, this is well within the supposed hiatus in crannog construction suggested by dendrochronological evidence discussed above. The entries read as follows;

Ailén Daingen edificatur
Ailén Daingen is built.⁹⁶

Ailén Daingen destruitur
Ailén Daingen is destroyed.⁹⁷

In the early eighth-century, there is another annalistic reference to the building of a probable crannog. This is in AD 725, when the *Annals of Ulster* accounts for the construction of an island named after a particular individual, 'the son of Crach'.

Ailen m. Craich construitur
The [fortified] island of Crach's son is constructed.⁹⁸

These annalistic entries, being brief and laconic notes, barely describe either the island or the place involved, but it is evident that are newly made fortifications, probably intended to promote a military or politically strategic purpose. Other accounts of island building are less strongly associated with military ventures, perhaps indicating their use as ordinary habitations. For example, in the early medieval *Vita Tripartita*, dating from c.AD 800, there is a brief reference to the building of an island in a bog.

Si insola in gromma, nunquam firmiter posunt stare..

⁹⁵ *A.F.M.* 606.4; Warner suggests the use of a slightly different translation prepared by Kuno Meyer., which reads as follows: 'There was a time/ when Loch dá Dam was a noble pool./It was not the lake that was noble but the reign of Áed, son of Colgu./ It is indifferent to me, now that the friend who loved me lives no more,/ who it was that built the wattle homestead over the island of Loch dá Dam'; cited in Warner, 'On crannogs and kings', p. 61

⁹⁶ *A.U.* 703.4

⁹⁷ *A.U.* 714.3

⁹⁸ *A.U.* 725:2

'if [they build] islands in a bog they never can stand firmly'.⁹⁹

Clearly then crannogs could also be built in wet, swampy areas, as well as lakes, recognising though that the hagiographer is not particularly concerned with describing the landscape as describing the saint's miracle working. The context of the entry is an account of how Saint Patrick curses a man so that any of his building projects would be doomed to failure. In this case, if he attempts to build an island, its foundations would never be stable, certainly a potential problem in any crannog building venture.

In early Irish historical sources, island building events are usually associated with the powerful, as might be expected by their focus on upper social classes. However, it is interesting that crannogs can be associated with population groups, territories, particular individuals (e.g. 'Maic Crach') or the unfortunate man in the *Vita Tripartita*. In other early medieval documentary sources, crannogs are unambiguously associated with kingship. Warner has proposed that such 'royal' crannogs were occasionally used as residences, as summer lodges or as fortified strongholds for refuge at times of danger.¹⁰⁰ He also suggests that other documentary references to kings residing, fighting and dying on their islands indicate a strong numinous association between lakes, islands and power.

This is particularly true of the late tenth, eleventh and particularly the twelfth centuries, when the extension of royal powers and the growth of greater dynastic overlordships appears to have led to the construction of royal fortresses, military fortifications and even river bridges.¹⁰¹ Significantly, some of these are associated with Brian Boraimhe. In the *Annals of Inisfallen, inter alia*, there are various references to the construction of island fortresses by Brian at *Inis Locha Gair* (Lough Gur, Co. Limerick, where there is a crannog off Knockadoon) and *Inis Locha Sainglend* (an unidentified location) in the year AD 995.

Cumtach Cassil 7Inse Locha Gair 7Inse Locha Saingleand 7dentai imdai archena la Brian

The building of Cashel and of Inis Locha Gair and of Inis Locha Sainglenn and many structures besides, by Brian.¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Ludwig Bieler, *The Patrician texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin, 1979), p. 241.

¹⁰⁰ Warner, 'On crannogs and kings',

¹⁰¹ Donnchadh Ó Corráin, 'Aspects of early Irish history' in B.G. Scott (ed.), *Perspectives in Irish archaeology* (Belfast, 1974), pp. 64-75.

¹⁰² *Ann.Inisf.* 995.6

Although Mac Airt translated (in his edition of the *Annals of Inisfallen*) the word *cumtach* as ‘fortifying’, Ó Corráin has since pointed out that *cumtach*, *cumdach* is the verbal noun of *con-utuinc*, *con-utaing* ‘to build, to construct’. On this evidence, he argues that these annalistic references are describing the building of *new* fortresses, albeit some may be located on earlier sites. In 1012, Brian, according to the *Annals of Inisfallen*, extended these islands and other fortifications.

Daingne imda isin bliadain sin doronta la Brian .i. cathir Chind Chorad 7 Inis Gaill Duib 7 Inis Locha Sainglend 7 cathir cnuicc Fochuir

Many fortifications were made in the above year by Brian, viz, the fort of Cenn Corad, Inis Gaill Duib, Inis Locha Sainglenn and the fort of Cnoc Fochuir.¹⁰³

This sense of Irish kings building islands on lakes obviously also continues into the latter part of the early Middle Ages (and beyond). Thence, the *Annals of Ulster* refers in AD 1170 to the construction of an island (Inis Lacain) by the king of Uí Méith of the Airgialla dynasty, on a small lake on the River Bann, near the north coast of Ireland.

Diarmait h-Ua Ainbheith, ri h-Ua Meith 7 toisech marc-shuaighi righ Ailigh, do marbadh do longais táinic a h-Innsibh Orcc isin innsi ro cumtaighedh aca féin for Loch Ruidhe, .i., for Inis Lacain.

Diarmait Ua Ainbheith, king of Ui-Meith and leader of the horse-host of the king of Ailech, was killed by a fleet that came from the Islands of Orcc to the Island that was built by himself upon Loch-Ruidhe, namely, upon Inis-Lachain.¹⁰⁴

Archaeological evidence

Building a crannog would have been a significant historical event for early medieval communities. The physicality of the labour of crannog construction, the sheer effort required, the sweating and cursing, the splashing around in water, is not something people would have quickly forgotten. For weeks, people would have felled trees, hewn and cleft timber planks, quarried boulders and scooped up peat, stones, earth and lake marls. At an opportune time, perhaps in late summer when lake-levels were low and the weather was better, this stone, earth and timber would have been carried and loaded onto boats or wooden rafts, floated across the water and placed coherently together in one place. Over time, and with no little labour, the cairn of stone would have emerged from the water.¹⁰⁵ There are a few sites that indicate how this work may have progressed. On Lough Carra, in south Mayo, one submerged crannog appeared to have been abandoned in mid-construction. The site (32m in diameter) consisted of four separate, small cairns of stone between which smaller stones were scattered. The combined cairns were enclosed

¹⁰³ *Ann Inisf.* 1012.5

¹⁰⁴ *A.U.* 1170.7; Hogan, *Onomasticon Godelicum*, p. 503, suggests that this is Loughan Island, on the River Bann, 2km south of Coleraine, Co. Antrim.

within a wooden palisade of vertical posts (1.5m ht). This would seem to indicate that the first task was to construct a retaining wooden revetment, and then fill in the internal area with mounds of material.¹⁰⁶

How much labour is involved in building a crannog?

How much work was required to build a crannog? If an early medieval community decided to build a cairn of stone, 15m in diameter, 3.5m in height, what did they have to do and how long would it have taken them? In the 1980s, several archaeological studies of labour estimates in prehistoric monument building were carried out, primarily to deduce scales of community involvement and energy expended. It is not a topic that archaeologists are much attracted to anymore, discouraged on the one hand by the horribly diverse and unpredictable variables involved, and on the other hand by the processual models of society they tended to be used for. Interestingly though, despite these criticisms, they were studies that stressed the physicality of labour, the actual effort required for people to make something.

Renfrew has carried out a detailed study of the amount of labour required to build a small Neolithic cairn at Quanterness, on Orkney, and this could provide useful insights into the construction of an early medieval crannog.¹⁰⁷ At Quanterness, the cairn measured c.15m in diameter, with a height of 3.5m, giving it an approximate volume of 840 cu. m. or c.1,000 cu yd. A local informant, a retired traditional wall builder, was able to suggest the time needed in the quarrying of stone, the shifting of material, the setting of very large stones in the ground, the building of walls and the adding of the cairn. He suggested that a good quarryman could turn out 4 x 23 cu. ft. of rock per 8 hour day, so 1000 cu. yd. of cairn material would require 2,300 man-hours of labour. Shifting 1,000 cu yd. over 50 yards could have taken c.1,000 man-hours. Setting the stones and building the walls would have required 2,040 hours. Adding the cairn would require the same amount of time as shifting the stone from the quarry. The total labour estimate was 6,340 man hours, but allowing for the absence in the Neolithic of metal tools for digging and of wheel barrows for transport, a minimum figure of about 10,000 hours was suggested. Colin Renfrew suggested that twenty persons (a household group and close relations, say)

¹⁰⁵ Transporting stone, earth and timber across even short distances of water would have been a difficult but not impossible task. Dug-out boats can carry a heavy, if small, load. Woven and leather covered coracles, with their broad beam and wide displacement could also have carried a reasonable load. The image that should be considered is of slow, steady labour over a good period of time.

¹⁰⁶ Diarmaid Lavelle, *An archaeological survey of Ballinrobe and district including Lough Mask and Lough Carra*. (Castlebar, 1994), p. 47.

¹⁰⁷ Colin Renfrew, *Investigations in Orkney* (London 1979), pp 212-14.

would have five able-bodied men available to devote themselves full-time to the task, working for eight hours a day. The building of a cairn of the size of Quanterness would have required about 250 days for that working party. To build it in a shorter time of 90 days (3 months) would have required a larger working party of fifteen men, perhaps drawn from neighbouring communities. Alternatively, if the cairn was built over a longer period of five years, the local five-strong construction gang could do it by working fifty days per year.

Building a crannog is a slightly different task obviously. In most cases, quarrying of stone would not have been necessary.¹⁰⁸ Boulders and stones deriving from eroded glacial drift lying around the foreshore could have been used. However, they still had to be moved to the water's edge, loaded in small amounts onto a dugout or raft, and transported across 50-60m of water, and then unloaded onto a wet, slippery and unstable surface of the emerging cairn. This might add 2 weeks of labour in shifting the materials. The felling, trimming and hewing of timber (3 weeks), or the digging and movement of baskets of soil to lay over the cairn's surface (3 weeks) would add to the work. So, even as a preliminary estimate, it could be suggested that to build even a moderate sized crannog, fifteen labourers might have had to work everyday, for 146 days, or c.5 months. These estimates might also apply equally to the re-building of a crannog after storms or after decades of abandonment or when a decision is made to heighten or enlarge it.

In reality, it is likely that people would have taken their time, gradually assembling raw materials, before beginning the task. On an early medieval crannog at Buiston, Scotland, dendrochronological studies showed that the timbers for a late seventh-century palisade had been assembled over a period of 5 years (AD 584-589) before they were used in the structure.¹⁰⁹ It is also important to remember that many crannogs were not built as a single event, but were gradually raised slowly across time, perhaps over 50-100 years. A small crannog could therefore be gradually enlarged and raised in height, as people decided to build up a slumped area or decided to lay a surface of earth, brushwood or stones across a crannog's surface. However, in thinking about the labour of crannog construction, it is still wise to think in terms of months rather than weeks or days of work. Even the addition of an extra 1m of stone across the surface of a 30m diameter crannog would require substantial work. In other words, it seems likely that the building

¹⁰⁸ Although the excavators of the early medieval Clea Lakes crannog, Co. Down suggest that its substructural layers of 'freshly quarried rock-chips and subsoil' would have been quarried near the shore of the lake and brought to the island by raft or boat; Collins and Proudfoot, 'Clea Lakes crannóg', pp 93.

or enhancement of a large crannog in open-water would have been a task requiring an entire community. Although requiring less work, a smaller crannog would still have been a reasonably significant building job for a household or family group.¹¹⁰

Building islands on water: the morphology of cairns, mounds and platforms

Introduction

Early medieval crannogs vary widely in methods of construction, morphology and size. Archaeological survey and excavation has revealed that in terms of type, sites can include high cairns, low cairns and low platforms of stone or earth/timber. There are also significant variations in site diameter, height and enclosed space. There are some massive cairns/mounds that measure 35-40m in diameter, rising to heights of 3-4m (e.g. Lagore, Moynagh Lough). However, most appear to medium-sized islets, c.18-25m in diameter, by 1-2m in height (e.g. Ballinderry No. 1, Sroove, Lough More). Although less is known of their use and chronology, there are also smaller mounds and cairns, typically 8-10m in diameter, by 50cm-1m in height. It is obvious that this range of sizes potentially relates to variable factors, such as chronological period (i.e. Bronze Age, early medieval, late medieval, etc), longevity of use and site history (i.e. crannogs occupied over hundreds of years will almost inevitably be larger), site location and building materials used. Amongst the most significant factors will be the social status of the crannog's inhabitants and the social and economic function of the site.

There is also significant variation in the raw materials used to build crannogs, and their stratigraphical sequences of structural and occupation deposits. There is still a general perception of crannogs as large soggy islands of timber and earth, enclosed within continuous wooden palisades. Certainly, sites in the south midlands, and east Ulster fit with this model. These crannogs appear today as mounds, and upon excavation some have been revealed to be largely composed of thick multi-phase layers of brushwood, timber and re-deposited peats and marls, although some stone is used. These are representative of the building technique that produced what Oliver Davies termed a 'packwerk' crannog, in which any suitable material was dumped onto the floor of a lake, pinned into position and retained within wooden piles.¹¹¹ In other regions, particularly in the northwest, the west and the north midlands, crannogs largely appear today as

¹⁰⁹ Crone, *The history of a Scottish lowland crannog*, p. 65.

¹¹⁰ In the past, I worked on an archaeological excavation of a Bronze Age hillfort at Mooghaun, where we removed limestone slabs from several sections of the stone ramparts. This heavy labour of 5-6 people resulted in ankle injuries, and many bruised and scratched hands, but only small amounts of stone were shifted every day.

¹¹¹ Davies, 'Contributions to the study of crannogs in south Ulster', pp 14-30.

stone cairns built over a timber foundation, with occasional wooden palisades and revetments around the edges. In the north midlands, on most sites, the only visible feature on the modern surface is a layer of heavy stone cladding or flagstones, but this probably masks deeper, more complex stratigraphy of soil, wood and organic materials beneath.¹¹² On some sites, horizontal timbers, brushwood and wattle can be seen at depths of 1-2m below the water, where erosion has exposed the lower foundation and occupation levels of the site.

In the past, scholars have sought to assign a classificatory scheme to this variation, believing that stone-built islets tend to the west, while the more organic-rich mounds are found in the south and east midlands. However, while this is true, in reality, people used different materials even within the same region. Due to both varying construction techniques and complex sequences of occupation and re-levelling, it has long been known that the stratigraphy of excavated crannogs reveals the use of different materials.¹¹³ At Lough Faughan, Co. Down, the crannog was built up of 4.3m of organic layers of brushwood, layers of reeds, bracken and heather, and the occasional re-used timber. At Clea Lakes, Co. Down, the site's basal layer was of freshly quarried rock chips, sealed under a layer of re-deposited peat, covered by midden deposits from another settlement site, before the habitation levels were introduced.¹¹⁴ Similarly, at Craigyarren, Co. Antrim, the mound was built up of deep, wet, soggy layers of bracken, timber and gravelly soil, before an occupation surface of planks was laid down.¹¹⁵

Recent excavations on an early medieval crannog at Buiston, Ayrshire, in south-west Scotland also revealed that the core of the mound was constructed by first dumping brushwood, timbers and stones into the lake muds until a firm surface rose above the water level. A foundation layer of relict oak planks and alder trunks was laid across this surface and then a layer of turves, cut from the surrounding slopes, alternating with layers of willow, hazel and birch brushwood deposited on top. It could even be seen that the turves were carefully laid in an overlapping fashion until the mound was finished. This 'core' provided the basal layer for subsequent occupation levels, houses and other features.¹¹⁶ Similar features could be noted in the substructural levels at Lough Faughan, Co. Down, indicating that it had been built from west to east by overlapping layers of

¹¹² Kelly, 'Observations on Irish crannogs', pp 81-98.

¹¹³ Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, pp 31-33; Kinahan, 'On crannoges in Lough Rea', pp 412-27; Kinahan, 'Observations on the exploration of crannogs', pp. 459-61.

¹¹⁴ Collins and Proudfoot, 'Clea Lakes crannóg', pp 92-101

¹¹⁵ Coffey, 'Craigyarren crannog', pp. 109-18.

¹¹⁶ Crone, *The history of a Scottish lowland crannog*, p.105.

peat and brushwood.¹¹⁷ It is also clear that crannogs were frequently re-built, levelled and resurfaced several times. Because of this, earlier occupation levels are often buried under a new structural layers of the crannog as peat, timber and stone is carried in to re-level the surface, as could be seen at Moynagh Lough, Ballinderry No. 2 and Island MacHugh. At Sroove, it can be seen that this re-building activity is extraordinarily dynamic, so that quite different floor surfaces were achieved by each period of re-building, whether they be of brushwood and clay, stone flags or even bone. So, while regional variations can be discerned (often based on the availability of raw materials and local lakebed conditions) more subtle chronological and site occupation history sequences should be sought.

In analysing the morphology of crannogs, it is also important to consider not only the buildup of materials, but their removal or alteration across time, revealing the dynamic formation processes experienced by a site during its construction, use and abandonment. As important are the subsequent taphonomic processes of hundreds of years of weathering, erosion, slumping, natural decay and wood rot, while more recent arterial drainage projects have furthermore exposed palisade wood on crannogs to several decades of desiccation on drained foreshores. For these reasons, Scottish archaeologists suggest that what is to be seen on a modern crannog surface is the skeletal remains of a larger island, stripped by centuries of aerobic decay, biological attack, wave erosion, instability and compression of its original layers of soil, earth and organic debris.¹¹⁸

Building crannogs in Westmeath: cairns, mounds and platforms

Crannogs in Westmeath

In Westmeath, archaeological surveys both by this author and previous researchers have provided good detailed information about crannog types, sizes and forms.¹¹⁹ There are at least 64 crannogs in Westmeath. They are typically circular or oval cairns of stone, earth and timber, occasionally retained within a wooden palisade or stone wall.

Westmeath's crannogs are typically low-cairn crannogs (under 2m in height, 29 sites, 45.3 per cent), but there are also a significant number (16 sites, 25 per cent) of high-

¹¹⁷ Collins, 'Lough Faughan', Fig. 3.

¹¹⁸ Crone, *et al* 'Scottish crannogs', p. 61.

¹¹⁹ Farrell, 'The crannog archaeological project (CAP), Republic of Ireland II: Lough Lene - offshore island survey', pp 221-28; Farrell, *et al*, 'The crannog archaeological project (CAP), Republic of Ireland I: a pre-preliminary report', pp 123-36; Farrell, 'The crannog survey project: the lakes of the west midlands', pp 27-29; Farrell and Buckley, 'Ennell and Analla, Co. Westmeath, Ireland' pp 281-85; C. Karkov and J. Ruffing, 'The crannogs of Lough Ennell: a computer survey' in *Riocht na Midhe* 8, no. 3, (1990-1991), pp 105-13; C. Karkov and J. Ruffing, 'The settlement patterns of Lough Ennell: the 1992 survey' in *Riocht na Midhe* 8, no. 4, (1992-1993), pp 54-61.

cairn crannogs (over 2m in height). There are also a large number of small platform sites (13 sites, 20.3 per cent), including those rock platform crannogs that are found around the Lough Ennell and Lough Derravarragh shorelines. Westmeath's crannogs tend to be either oval (24 sites, 37.5 per cent) or circular (26 sites, 40.6 per cent) in plan, although irregular forms are also known (13 sites, 20.3 per cent). In cross-section, the crannogs tend to be even in profile (48 sites, 75 per cent), although there are also several interesting sites (11 sites, 17.1 per cent) with a mid-cairn; a higher platform situated in the middle or towards one edge of the island (Fig. 6.3).

The Westmeath crannogs range quite widely in the diameter and height of their cairns (Fig. 6.4; Fig. 6.5). They range in diameter from 5m-50m (with even larger islets at 60-80m). Most of Westmeath's crannogs (35 sites, 54.7 per cent) measure between 11-25m diameter. There are also a significant number of larger cairns, with 19 sites (29.7 per cent) measuring between 26-50m in diameter. The crannogs also range widely in height from 50cm to 5m in height. The largest proportion (24 sites, 37.5 per cent) measure between 1-2m in height, but there are also several higher cairns, most of these (11 sites, 17.2 per cent), measuring between 2-3.5m in height. Strikingly, it is the largest crannogs (e.g. Cróinis, 4m; Castle Island, 4.5m; Coolure Demesne 1, 5.0m) that appear to be early medieval lordly or royal sites. These larger cairns are occasionally enclosed within an outer palisade, typically 10-15m offshore from the island. This palisade, when it is found, tends to enclose and protect the site from the lake, and is open towards the shoreline.

Westmeath's crannogs frequently have some type of distinctive enclosing or bounding structural feature (a wooden palisade, horizontal timbers, or stone kerbs or walls), despite the fact that this is amongst the most difficult morphological feature to assess without archaeological excavation.¹²⁰ It is also a complex feature to assess, because some sites have more than one enclosing feature (i.e. both an inner and outer palisade, along with a stone kerb). Eleven (16.6 per cent) crannogs have an 'inner palisade', 3 (4.4 per cent) crannogs have an 'outer palisade', 15 (22.3 per cent) have a stone kerb, 1 (1.4 per cent) site has a stone wall, 1 (1.4 per cent) site has horizontal timbers, while 3 (4.4 per cent) sites have posts 'at the edge' of the cairn. There is also a large number of crannogs (33 sites, 49.2 per cent), where there is no visible (or currently identifiable) enclosing feature (Fig. 6.6).

¹²⁰ Almost certainly, a substantial proportion of those crannogs where no palisade is visible today, do have them, albeit buried under cairn collapse, occupation deposits and modern vegetation or water-depths.

Fig. 6.3. Cairn types of Westmeath crannogs

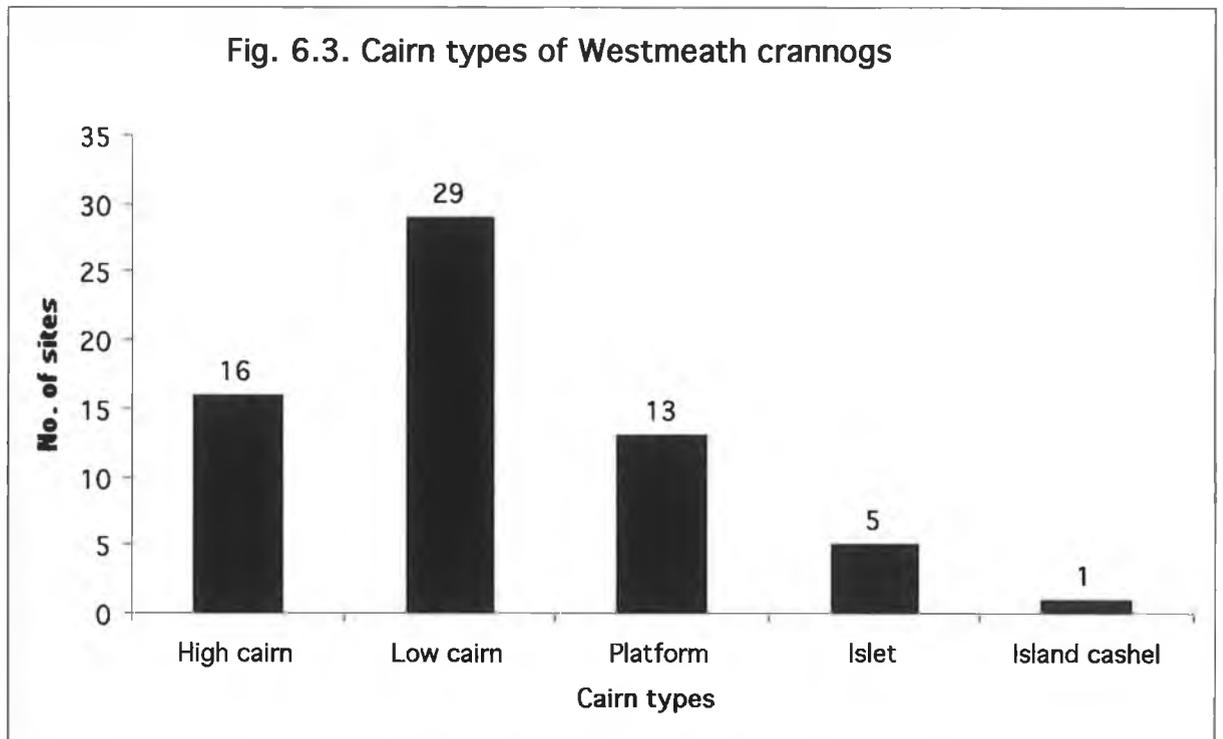


Fig. 6.4. Cairn heights of Westmeath crannogs

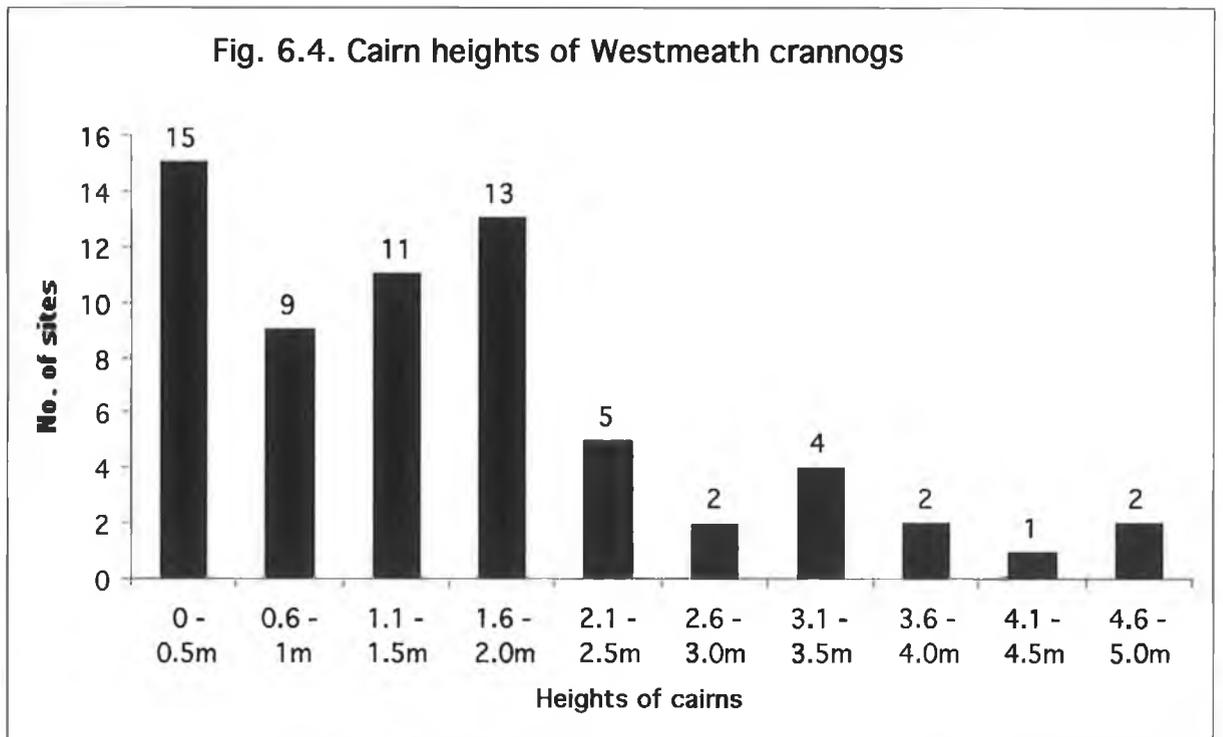


Fig. 6.5 Cairn diameters of Westmeath crannogs

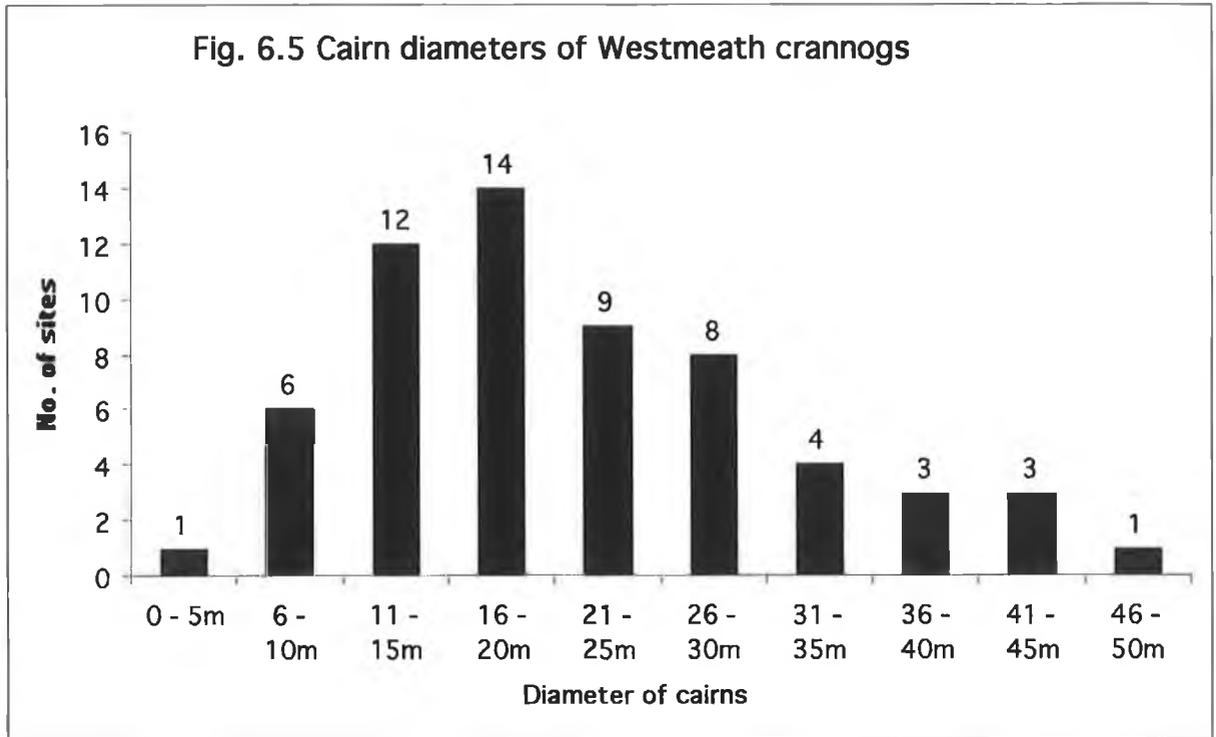


Fig. 6.6 Edge/boundary features on Westmeath crannogs

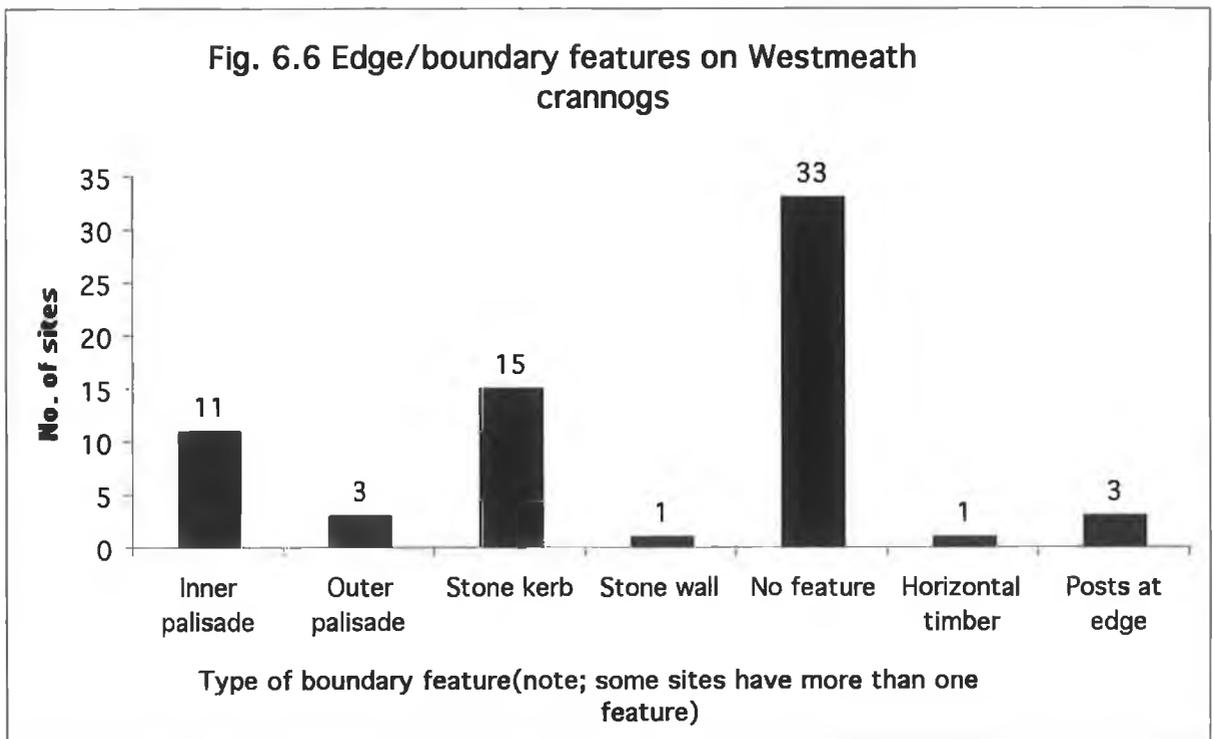


Fig. 6.7. Distance to shoreline amongst Westmeath crannogs

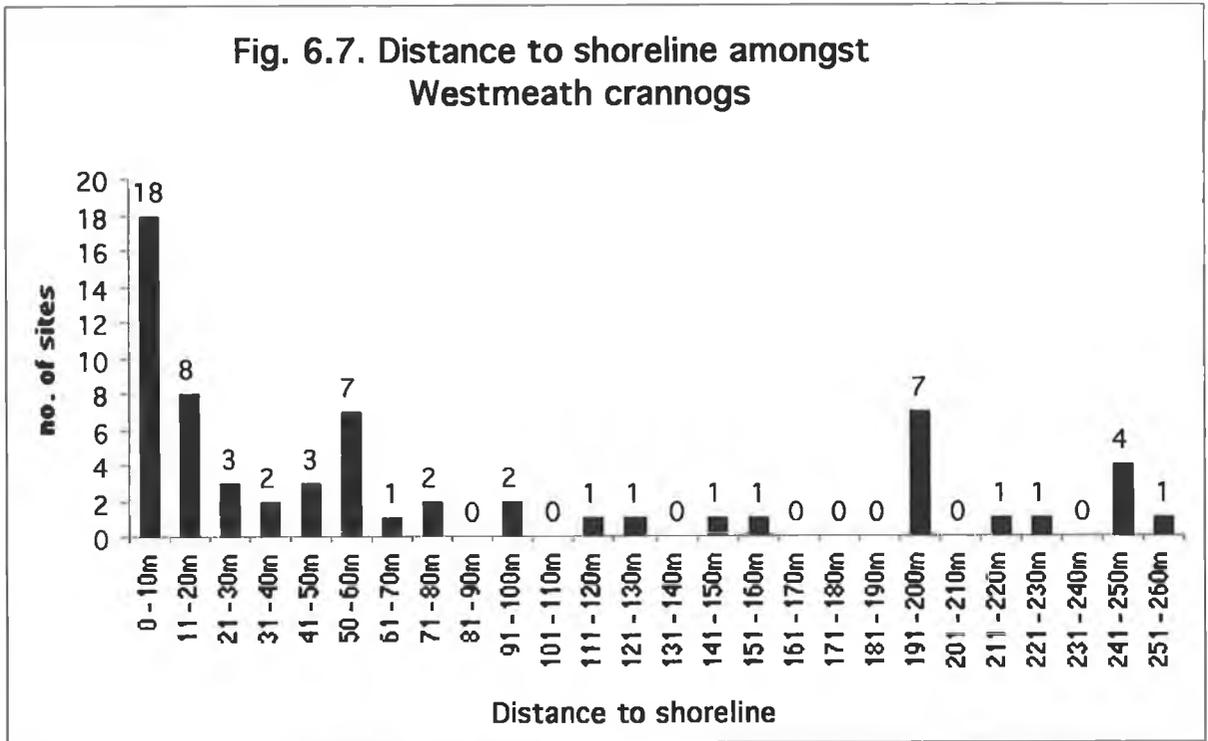
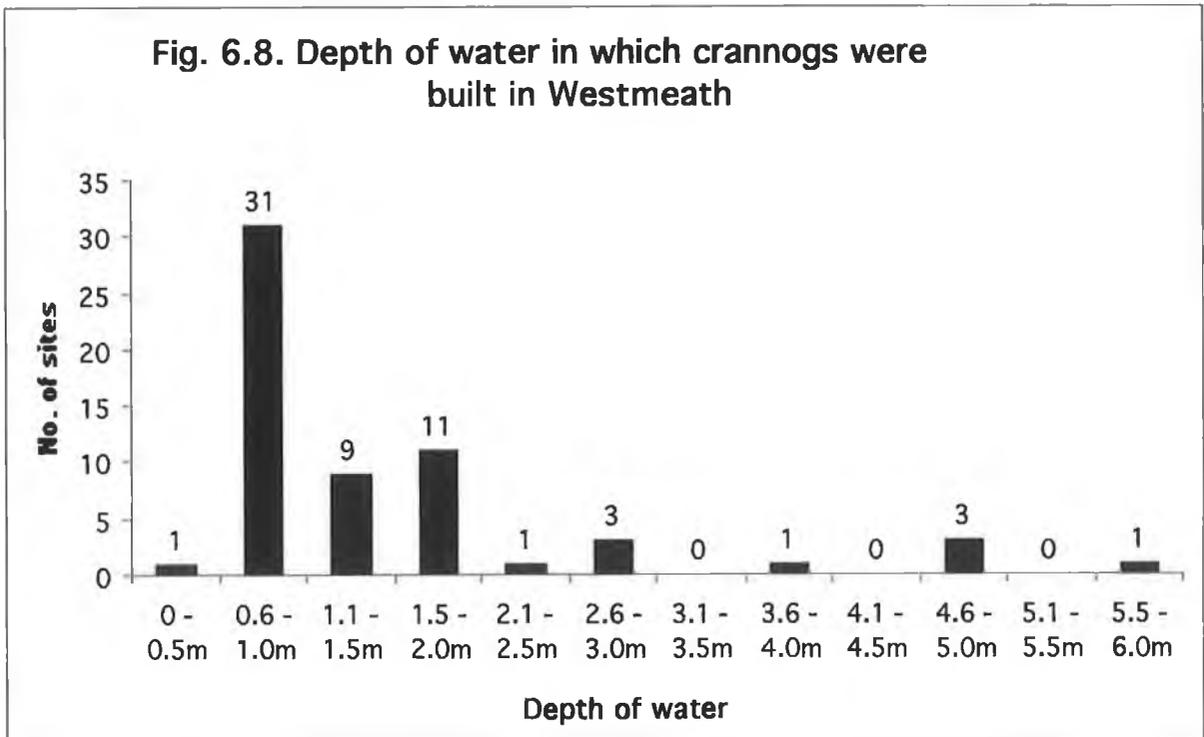


Fig. 6.8. Depth of water in which crannogs were built in Westmeath



Westmeath's crannogs vary in their accessibility, which can essentially be defined by their relative proximity to the shore and the depth of the water in which they are located. A significantly high proportion (26 sites, 40.6 per cent) of the county's crannogs are essentially shoreline sites, being located within 20m of dryland (Fig. 6.7). Thereafter, they are located in a surprisingly wide range of distances from the land. There are 18 sites (27.4 per cent) situated between 20-80m from the shoreline, indicating a gradually more inaccessible siting, probably usually requiring the use of a boat. Thereafter, a small number of crannogs can be located at some striking distance from the land. For example, the early medieval crannog at Coolure Demesne 1 is 120m from the shore, the early medieval royal crannog of Cróinis is 250m from land, while there are 14 (21.4 per cent) other crannogs situated between 190-260m from dryland. This includes the early medieval crannogs of Ballinderry no. 1, Clonickilvant, Goose Island and School Boy Island (Lough Ennell) situated c.200-230m from original dryland.

Westmeath's crannogs are also built in a range of water depths, but are mostly found in fairly shallow water (Fig. 6.8). For example, both Lough Ennell and Lough Derravarragh are relatively shallow lakes, with water depths of 2-3m out in the middle of the water body. Most crannogs tend to be built in relatively shallow water (between 1-2m in depth). There are 31 sites (50.8 per cent) at 50cm-1.0m, 9 sites (14.8 per cent) at 1-1.5m, 11 sites (18 per cent) at 1.5-2.0m (i.e. over capacity of people to wade out). Thereafter, sites are in progressively and significantly deeper water. There are 4 sites (6.5 per cent) in 2-3m, 1 site (1.6 per cent; Coolure Demesne 1) at 4.0, 3 sites (4.9 per cent) between 4.5-5.0m depths. This includes the Dysart Island 1 (Lough Ennell) and the Faughalstown (Lough Derravarragh) crannogs, both of which are in 4m water depth. It is clear that some of these deep-water crannogs can be early medieval in date, as the Castle Island crannog on Lough Lene is built in up to 6m depth of water.

In summary, a regional analysis of Westmeath's crannogs indicates an interesting range of evidence for crannog building, for cairn diameter and height, for the use of various enclosing features and for the choice of location along a lakeshore or in water. It is also possible to look at the morphology of crannogs at a local scale, namely on Lough Derravarragh and Lough Ennell.

Cairns, mounds and platforms on Lough Derravarragh

On Lough Derravarragh, archaeological surveys reveal that there are at least 18 crannogs distributed around the lake. These crannogs are described in detail in Appendix

2, which provides information on their size, location, architectural features and associated finds. At least two crannogs (Coolure 1, Ballynakill 1) have produced evidence for some early medieval activity, but comparative archaeology (particularly with recent surveys on Lough Gara) suggest that many of the others can also be dated to the early Middle Ages. There are 3 (17 per cent) high-cairn crannogs, 12 low-cairn crannogs (67 per cent), 1 platform (5 per cent) and 2 (11 per cent) enhanced natural islets. In plan, the crannogs are predominantly circular (8 sites, 44 per cent), although oval (4 sites, 22 per cent) or irregular (6, 33 per cent) shaped crannogs are also known. They are mostly even in cross-section (9 sites, 50 per cent), with 6 (33 per cent) sites having a mid-cairn, while 3 (17 per cent) sites have a mid-hollow.

The Lough Derravarragh crannogs vary significantly in size, ranging between 8-45m in maximum diameter by 50cm-5m in height, with an average diameter of 20.37m. However, most (i.e. 15 cairns, 83 per cent) of the crannogs measure between 6-25m diameter. There is a sizeable group (9 sites, 50 per cent) of small low-cairns (measuring 11-15m in diameter, by 0.5-1.0m in height). There are 4 (22 per cent) medium-sized cairns (16-25m diameter, by 1m-2m height). Between these smaller sites and the three largest crannogs, Coolure 1 (36m diam., 5m height), Coolure 2 (36m diam., 1.5m height) Coolure 3 (45m diam., 2m height), there is actually a significant statistical gap. In other words, on Lough Derravarragh, although most of the lake's crannogs are typically relatively small low-cairn sites, c.15m in diameter, by 1.5m in height, there are also several significantly larger sites. It is likely that the size of the crannogs relates to their different social status, occupation histories and the function. Nevertheless, it is clear that the large high-cairn crannogs required much more labour to build and would have presented a strong visual image of a large island to outsiders.

The Lough Derravarragh crannogs vary in their siting and accessibility, but there is a strong sense of the smaller crannogs being much easier to access than the larger sites. The crannogs were built at a variety of distances from the original shoreline.¹²¹ Most (11 sites, 61 per cent) are within 10m of the dryland. However, there are several other sites that were clearly placed at some distance from the shore, requiring rather more effort to build and to get to. These include crannogs at distances of 18m (Monintown), 50m (Kiltoom 10), 51m (Ballynakill 2) and 70m (Faughalstown) from the original

¹²¹ Lough Derravarragh was lowered by an arterial drainage project in the late 1960s, and possibly also in the 1860s. It is possible to identify the pre-drainage (and probable early medieval) shoreline as a scarp in the slope around the lake edge. A significantly higher waterline can also be identified by a second scarp further inland. This probably was the shoreline of an early post-glacial lake.

shoreline. There are also three cairns that are significantly distant from any adjacent dryland. This includes a large early medieval crannog at Coolure 1 (120m from shoreline), Ballynakill 1 (160m) and Donore 1 (250m). In other words, while 11 sites (61 per cent) were probably accessible by the use of stone pathways or causeways or by people willing to walk through hip-deep water, at least 7 (39 per cent) sites were highly inaccessible, and would have required a boat to reach them.

Most of the Lough Derravarragh crannogs are located on dry ground today, due to modern drainage projects that dropped the lake levels by 1-2m. However, it is clear that even originally, most (12 sites, 67 per cent) of the crannogs were constructed in quite shallow water (0.5-1.0m in depth). There were 4 (22 per cent) sites (Monintown, Ballynakill 2, Kiltoom 10, Donore 1) that were located in slightly deeper (i.e. 1.5-2.0m depth) water. On Lough Derravarragh, the modern lake-bed is typically of a thin layer of marl sediments directly over a heavy glacial till soil, so the crannogs would not have required an extensive timber foundation. It is unknown whether any were built on prehistoric sites. Two crannogs (Coolure 3, Kiltoom 10) are built on top of natural geological features (massive outcrops of limestone bedrock), so that building them there would have been a significantly easier task. There is also 1 crannog (Ballynakill 1) that appears to have been deliberately placed on a natural, gravelly ridge of shallows situated 160m out in the lake. At this location, despite the distance from dryland, the lake's water depth is hardly more than 1-2m. Interestingly, this means that there are only 6 sites (Ballynakill 1, Kiltoom 10, Donore 1, Monintown 1, Faughalstown 1, Coolure 1) that were constructed in anything like deep water. Only two are in significantly deeper water (Coolure 1 at 2-3m, Faughalstown 1 at 4m depth).¹²²

Early medieval 'royal' crannog', Coolure Demesne 1

It has already been suggested (see Chapter 5 above) that there is at least one early medieval crannog on the lake that was of significant social status. This is Coolure Demesne 1, a massive, oval cairn of stone (36m in diameter, by 5m in height), located at the northern shore of the lake, adjacent to a large raised ringfort. It is easily the largest crannog on the lake, located in fairly deep water (up to 4m originally), at about 120m from the original shoreline (Fig. 6.9).

¹²² It is useful to define water depths in relation to the human body, and the real dangers of drowning. Very shallow water can be defined as 0- 0.5m (or knee depth). Shallow water is below 0.5-1m (waist depth). Deep water is between 1-2m (i.e. sufficiently near to or over an average person's height of 1.7m to be cause for caution. Finally, very deep water could be considered as being any water depth



Fig. 6.9 View of Coolure Demesne 1 crannog, Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath. It was probably an early medieval royal or lordly site of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair. This large, high-cairn crannog (36m in diameter, 5m in height) enclosed within an oak plank and roundwood palisade was immensely rich in artefactual evidence, with mounts, pins and armlets dating from the sixth to the tenth century AD.

It has an impressive oak plank palisade and a roundwood palisade exposed to view along its southern arc, while horizontal timbers can also be seen there interlaced with the stones suggesting that the crannog was laid across a timber raft foundation. The site has a mid-cairn on its northern (landward) side, where a narrow platform overlooks a broad, level terrace across the southern (lakeward) side of the island. The crannog thus presents a steep slope to the land and a level terrace back to the lake. Interestingly, this means that when viewed from the shoreline (the location of an early medieval ringfort), its scale is usefully enhanced. The crannog is also strategically placed within a local bay or inlet, meaning that it can be clearly seen from a wide area of land surrounding the site, while the crannog's inhabitants also would have had good views in all directions.

Significantly, Coolure 1 crannog is also the only site on the lake to have produced a large assemblage of early medieval artefacts (all collected in the 1980s by treasure hunters), making it one of the richest archaeological sites in the midlands. Scattered

over 2m.

across the surface of the island, there is also a large amount of butchered and broken cattle, pig and sheep bone, perhaps representing a period of feasting or at least the consumption of a substantial amount of food. This crannog surface has also produced a decorated bronze plaque, bearing a cross design in red and yellow enamel and blue and white millefiori glass. This may have been a mount from an early medieval shrine, possibly dated to the fifth to seventh century AD.¹²³ There are also other early medieval objects from the crannog, albeit dating to slightly later, including a hand-pin, two bronze stick pins, two bronze ringed-pins, a bronze mount and ruler and a pair of Viking Age balance scales.¹²⁴ There is also a hoard of Hiberno-Norse hack silver, including two stamped armlets (NMI 1988:224 a-b), a complete silver ingot (NMI 1988:224 c), three silver ingots fragments (NMI 1988:224 d-f) and a silver bracelet. These objects, like other similar silver hoards and coins from the north midlands, may have represented political tribute exacted from the population of tenth to eleventh century Hiberno-Norse Dublin by the Clann Cholmáin kings based on Lough Ennell. They may have been brought thence as political gifts to the community inhabiting the shores of Lough Derravarragh.

It seems likely that the Coolure 1 crannog was occupied in the sixth to eighth century, but that the latest period of occupation on the island was in the eleventh to twelfth century AD. Indeed, the Coolure site is most similar to the known early medieval royal crannog at Cróinis, on Lough Ennell, itself also a massive, high-cairn crannog stone, timber and earth. Although the Coolure crannog and ringfort are not mentioned in historical texts, it is suggested here that they are jointly the royal residences and fortifications of a population group known as the Cúl Fobair, who appear in the genealogies in the guise of Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair.¹²⁵ O'Donovan took them to be a branch of the Connacht Uí Fiachrach, but this is not certain.¹²⁶ In any case, the richness of the finds indicates that this was a settlement of a locally significant, but by no means a regionally powerful population.

¹²³ Carroll, 'Millefiori in the development of early Irish enamelling', at p. 53, Fig. 2 ; Kelly, 'Protecting Ireland's archaeological heritage', p. 221, 215, interprets it as seventh to eighth century in date.

¹²⁴ Ragnaill Ó Floinn, 'The archaeology of the early Viking Age in Ireland' in H.B. Clarke, M. Ní Mhaonaigh and R. Ó Floinn (eds.), *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age* (Dublin, 1998), pp 131-65, at p. 150, p. 175; John Sheehan, 'Early Viking Age silver hoards from Ireland and their Scandinavian elements' in H.B. Clarke, M. Ní Mhaonaigh and R. Ó Floinn (eds.), *Ireland and Scandinavia in the early Viking Age* (Dublin, 1998), pp 166-202, at p. 201.

¹²⁵ Walsh, 'A fragment used by Keating', at p. 8, note 39 ; Walsh, *The placenames of Westmeath*.

¹²⁶ John O'Donovan, *The genealogies, tribes and customs of Hy-Fiachrach, commonly called O'Dowda's Country*. (Dublin, 1844), p. 33. I thank Edel Bhreathnach for providing me with this reference.



Fig. 6.10 Early medieval Ballynakill 1 crannog, Lough Derravarragh, Co.. Westmeath. This site has produced early medieval bronze mounts, brooch fragments and animal bone. It is a small, isolated low-cairn crannog (8m in diameter, 1m in height) built on a gravelly shoal, but is submerged during the winter. It may have been the early medieval island habitation or seasonal dwelling of an 'ordinary', farming community.

It is likely that both the early medieval crannog's siting in the landscape and its impressive architecture (its massive cairn, sloping mounds, enclosing oak wood palisades, etc) was deliberately signalling social status and prestige. However, the re-building of the cairn, its repair and reconstruction (as witnessed by its diameter, height, successive palisades and artefactual evidence for multi-period occupation) also indicates that local communities were actively investing in the site across time. This was the royal seat of the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair and working on it suggested a loyalty to the king, to the kin-group and to the territory (with the boundary of the túath possibly running along the lakeshore).

Lower-status crannogs, defensive or refuge sites, Ballynakill 1

However, not all of Lough Derravarragh's crannogs are high-status sites, others may have been dwellings of lower nobles, wealthy farmers or were strategic sites placed by the community on routeways or in locations designed to impose their visibility on the opposite shoreline (e.g. Donore 1, Kiltoom 10, Monintown 1, Ballynakill 1). These crannogs are relatively substantial cairns of stone, measuring 16-25m in diameter, by 2-3m in height. Two (e.g. Donore 1, Ballynakill 1) are located at substantial distances from

the shore (250m and 160m respectively), but are nonetheless in relatively shallow water. In contrast, Monintown 1 is located beside the shoreline, at the southeast end of the lake.

There is evidence for early medieval activity on at least one of these smaller crannogs. Ballynakill 1 is a low, circular cairn, (8m diam, 1m height) situated in shallow water on a gravelly ridge, 160m from the dryland shore (Fig. 6.10). It is enclosed within a cairn-edge revetment of oak roundwood posts and it has a possible wooden jetty (of vertical posts) at its northwest end. The site could certainly have supported a single roundhouse, or may have been an open platform. The crannog has previously produced an early medieval bronze ring-brooch (NMI 1982:74), an early medieval bronze mount (NMI 1984:143a) and a two-piece bronze escutcheon (NMI 1984:143b). Archaeological survey has also recently produced a possible early medieval iron awl¹²⁷ as well as a small scatter of animal bone (probably cattle and pig). These few finds probably indicate its use as an early medieval dwelling of some type. These smaller crannogs are obviously of significantly different function and social status to the larger Coolure 1 site.

'Poor people's crannogs', Kiltoom

There are also a number of significantly smaller crannogs on the lake. At Kiltoom 1-8, these are typically small, circular or oval low-cairn sites, (11-15m in diameter, by 0.5-1.5m in height). These are an architecturally coherent group, in terms of their location, size and appearance. They are built along a straight length of shore, and were clearly constructed at measured intervals (c.50m apart) along the lake-edge. It is clear that these small crannogs were built of stones that had been gathered from the foreshore immediately surrounding the site. This is indicated by the fact that, although the lough's foreshore is generally stony, there are relatively few stones on the ground immediately around the cairns. The stones on the cairn themselves also have wave erosion grooves and their water-rolled and weathered surfaces show that they had originally been located in the splash zone. In these cases, a few days work by a small social group, perhaps a household or family had worked to build the cairns, using the raw materials immediately available to them. There is a range of features associated with them, including pathways or causeways, stone kerbs, entrance ramps and surfaces of flagstones and smaller cobbles (Fig. 6.11a; Fig. 6.11b).

¹²⁷ Observed by the author in May, 2003, but left in the water. This is a long, narrowing iron spike (c. 30cm in length, 1cm diameter). It is similar to iron spikes from Lagore crannog; i.e. Hencken, 'Lagore', Fig. 42.1646, Fig. 47.207, Fig. 56.c.



Fig. 6.11a Possible early medieval low-cairn crannog at Kiltoom 7, Lough Derravarragh. These intriguing sites (there are 8 similar crannogs along this shoreline) are small, stony crannogs (11-15m diameter, 1m in height), built in ankle deep water on the east shore of the lake. They are reached by short, narrow causeways and could be interpreted as small lake-shore dwellings of 'poor people' associated with the nearby church of Cell Toma (Kiltoom).



Fig. 6.11b View of fabric of stone on Kiltoom 7. These sites are similar in size, form and appearance to the early medieval crannog of Sroove, Co. Sligo. On the shore side, the site appears to be a low cairn of small stones. In contrast, the massive kerb stones on the lakeward side give it a much more impressive façade for people looking at it from boats.

These crannogs at Kiltoom appear to be similar in size, construction and siting to the early medieval crannog recently excavated at Sroove, Co. Sligo. They may well be small early medieval crannogs built in very shallow water (50cm depth), about 10-15m from the original shoreline. They could be interpreted as the lake-edge dwellings of a small close-knit community, perhaps 5-6 households or families. They may well be summer occupation sites, as they are severely exposed to winter storms. It is interesting that these people were also placing themselves at some remove from ringforts and crannogs found elsewhere around the lake. It is possible that they are somehow related to the early medieval church and graveyard at Kiltoom immediately to the east.

In conclusion, it is possible to suggest from the sizes, morphologies and locations of the crannogs on Lough Derravarragh, significant variations in social status and ranking. There are hints too that they include an early medieval 'royal' crannog, as well as smaller settlements, defensive or strategically placed islands, as well as possible low-status crannogs of poor, or even servile groups.

Cairns, mounds and platforms on Lough Ennell

On Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath, previous underwater archaeological surveys by the Crannog Archaeological Project and my own more recent archaeological surveys also enable a closer analysis of their morphology, size and construction techniques. There are at least 27 crannogs on Lough Ennell (Fig. 6.12). There are 7 (26 per cent) high cairns, 4 (15 per cent) low-cairns, 12 (44 per cent) platforms and 1 island cashel (i.e. Cherry Island). They are predominantly oval (52 per cent), although circular (18 per cent) and irregular (26 per cent) forms are known.

The crannogs range in size, with diameter/lengths between 5-50m. However, despite this variation, a substantial proportion of the sites, 43 (58 per cent), measure between 10-20m in diameter. The crannogs tend to be fairly low, with 21 sites (78 per cent) between 50cm-2.0m in height. There are also four crannogs (Goose Island, Schoolboy Island, Shanoge, Cróinis) between 3-4m in height, while the small island at Dysart Island 1 stands at 5m height. In cross-section, the crannogs are predominantly (22 sites, 81 per cent) level on top. In terms of the cairn edges, 19 (70 per cent) slope gradually down into the water, although those sites in deeper water tend to have steeper sides.

The edges of the crannogs are bounded in various ways. There is a stone wall on 1 site (Cherry Island), this being an island cashel.

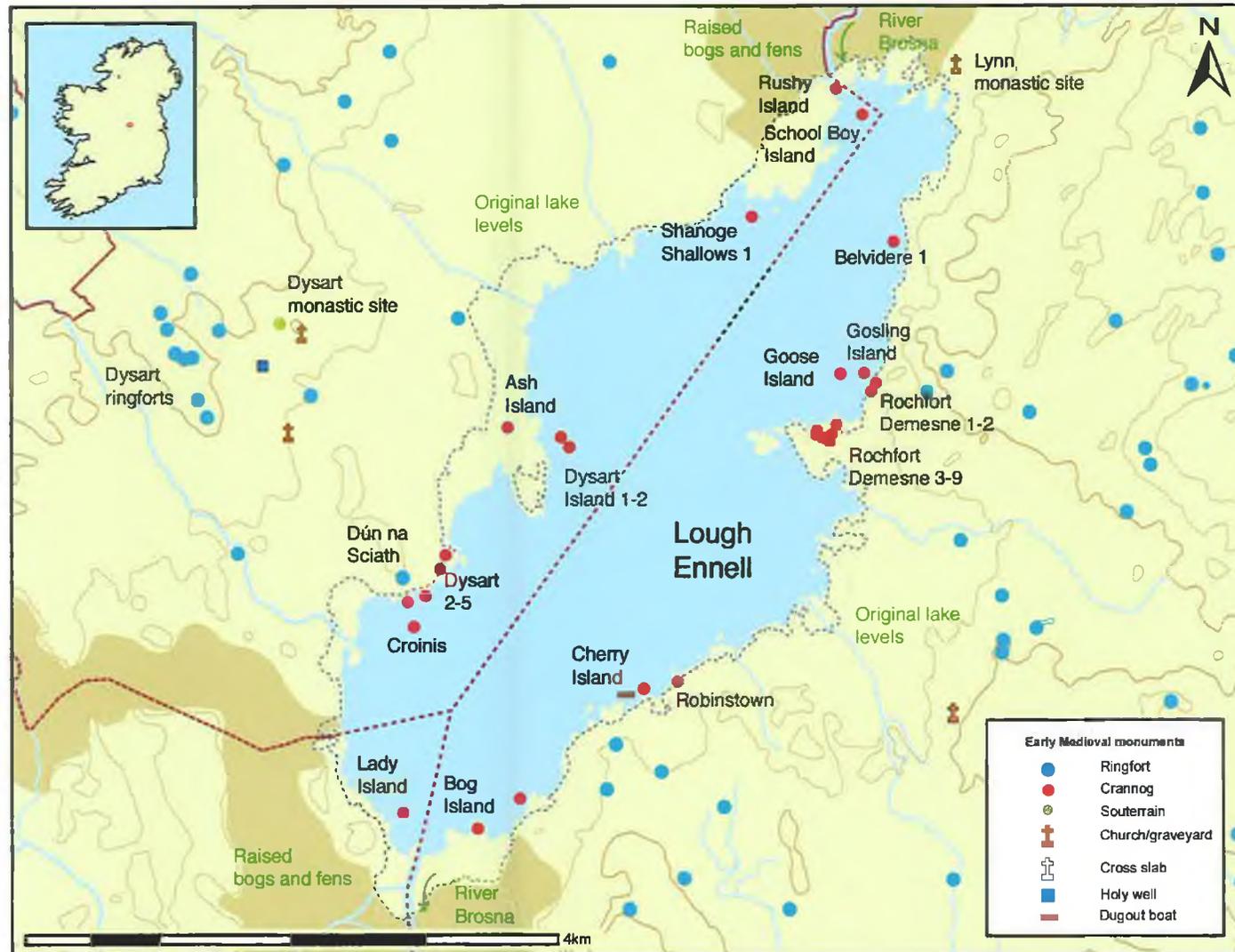


Fig. 6.12 Distribution map of crannogs on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath

There is a low, stone kerb on 4 (15 per cent) sites. One crannog (Cróinis) is enclosed within an inner and an outer wooden palisade, while one crannog (Goose Island) is partly enclosed on its outer side by an outer palisade. Interestingly then, most (20 sites, 74 per cent) of the crannogs have no visible enclosing feature, perhaps suggesting that the water line was the real boundary. On the other hand, it is likely that excavation would reveal a much higher proportion of palisades.

The distance of the crannogs from the original shoreline can be difficult to assess, due to modern drainage projects and consequent alteration of lake levels. During my surveys, these distances were measured to the apparent original lake level marked by a scarp on the shoreline. The crannogs were located at a range of distances from the shore, ranging from 10m to 250m. In terms of a statistical analysis, there is a small cluster of 6 (22 per cent) sites located at 50-60m distance from the shore. Interestingly, there are 7 crannogs built at a substantial distance out into the water, between 200-260m. All of these crannogs are highly visible from large distances across the lake, so it seems likely that they were constructed there to maximise the site's visibility from a longer stretch of shoreline. Although the crannogs are found in a fairly wide range of water depths, 17 sites (62 per cent) were in 'very shallow' (i.e. 0-50cm) or 'shallow' (50cm-1.0m) water. Crannogs found in deeper water include Goose Island (2.2m), Nure (2.5m), Ash Island (2.5m) and Dysart Island 2 (2.5m), Dysart Island 1 (5m). The early medieval royal crannog at Cróinis was built in water depths of at least 3m.

It is worth looking in more detail at the forms and morphology of some of these crannogs. There are 7 (26 per cent) high cairns (Cróinis, Dysart Island 1, Ash Island, School Boy Island, Goose Island, Nure, Cherry Island). These are typically large circular or oval mounds of boulders, stones and timber, 18-50m in diameter, 2-5m in height. At least two of these cairns (Cróinis, Goose Island) are enclosed within a wooden palisade. Most of these are probably early medieval in date, as several have produced early medieval objects. For example, Cróinis has produced early medieval bronze pins, Ash Island has produced an early medieval iron sword, pommel, spearhead, two ringed-pins, a bronze ring, and a stone lamp, while School Boy Island has produced two early medieval (i.e. ninth to tenth century) bronze handbells.

The best-known early medieval crannog is Cróinis, as already stated, the historically attested royal site of Maél Sechnaill maic Domnaill of the Clann Cholmáin of the southern Uí Néill, who died on the island in AD 1022. Cróinis exhibits all the features

that might be expected on an early medieval high-status crannog. It is a massive, oval cairn (50m diameter, 3-4m in height) of stone, built in deep water, at some distance from the shoreline. It is enclosed within a roundwood palisade, 10m from the cairn, dated to c.AD 850. It is also enclosed at the water line by an inner plank palisade, dendrochronologically dated to AD 1107 ± 9 years or later. Early medieval finds, including eleventh to twelfth-century bronze pins were found on the crannog's surface. The crannog is also situated within an early medieval settlement complex. There is a low-cairn crannog nearby (Dysart 2), while there are also several low-cairn crannogs and platforms further to the north along the shoreline (Dysart 3-5). There is also an impressive raised ringfort on the neighbouring dryland, defined by a high level platform, surrounded on its north side by a deep ditch and low external bank. Situated on a local prominence, this ringfort provides excellent views in all directions, but particularly towards the crannog in the lake below it. This ringfort is probably the site of Dún na Sciath ('fort of the shields'), also historically attested as a royal residence of the Clann Cholmáin kings of the southern Uí Néill.¹²⁸ Both ringfort and crannog probably operated as a pair (similar to the ringfort and crannog at Coolure, on Lough Derravarragh), probably used for royal dwelling, public assemblies and other gatherings.

Other islands and crannogs were probably also used as socially high-status sites. Directly across the lake from Cróinis and Dún na Sciath, there is a natural island known today as Cherry Island (Robinstown townland), about 60m from the original shoreline. On the highest part of the island, there is a substantial stone cashel, circular in plan (36m diam, 2m in height), with a stepped stone-built rampart. At the north side of the island is an unusual boat dock, defined by a large rectangular pool that cuts into the island. There are also early medieval finds from this site, including Viking hack silver, while a Viking hoard of ingots was also found on the dryland at Carrick. This may be the site known as Inis na Cairrge, mentioned in the twelfth-century *Life* of Colmáin Maic Lúachain and apparently used as a stronghold and residence of the kings of Fir Tulach.¹²⁹

¹²⁸ By the early nineteenth century, the early medieval role of the crannog of Croinis had been 'forgotten' locally, and the site was merely named 'Cormorant Island' on a lake that was now known as 'Belvidere Lake'. John O'Donovan's placename research re-established its significance and it is locally known today as 'Malachy's Island'. The site was briefly 'explored' by Macalister, who, discouraged by his discovery of a 'folly' (in reality, the base of a late medieval towerhouse), abandoned his excavations. It was also recorded by the Crannog Archaeological Project (CAP) in the 1980s; James Woods, *Annals of Westmeath: Ancient and modern* (Dublin, 1907), pp 66-7; MacAlister, 'On an excavation conducted on Cro-Inis, Loch Ennell', pp 248-51; Farrell, 'The Crannog Archaeological Project (CAP): Archaeological field research in the lakes of the west midlands'; Kelly 'Observations on Irish lake dwellings', p. 89.

¹²⁹ Meyer, *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin* § 50.

Goose Island, a stone cairn (35m diameter, 3.5m in height) with an encircling roundwood palisade situated on the eastern shore has also been dated to the early medieval period. (radiocarbon dates between the ninth to tenth centuries AD). Goose Island is also located within a local settlement complex, with smaller crannogs (Gosling Island), lake-edge cairns and platforms (Rochfort Demesne) and ringforts in close proximity. However, it is clear that these crannogs are unusual, both in terms of their enclosed size, height and deep-water location. Most of the crannogs around the lake are actually small, low-cairn sites, typically 16-20m in diameter, 2-3m in height. There are also large numbers of low, oval and irregular shaped platforms and cairns of stone (10-12m in diameter, by 50cm-1m in height).

Crannogs on Lough Lene

On Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath, underwater survey has revealed that the crannogs (Nun's Island and Castle Island) there are essentially cairns of stone, on timber foundations and natural bedrock (Fig. 6.13). It is also interesting that they are located directly off a large natural island in the middle of the lake, Turgesius Island, suggesting that a built island was still required.¹³⁰ Castle Island is an interesting crannog, built of large limestone slabs in unusually deep water between Turgesius Island and the mainland.¹³¹ It is a circular cairn (c.20m in diameter, by 4.5m in height), standing in water between 3-6m in depth (i.e. the lake deepens further away from the island). The crannog is unusually steep-sided, although its slope is more gradual to the west, towards the mainland. While there was no evidence for a palisade, wooden timbers are visible within the cairn, on the north and west sectors. Intriguingly, there is also a substantial assemblage of heavy timber in deeper water to the N/NE of the island. It is possible that this small cairn would once have supported a much larger structure in wood. An early medieval bronze hand bell and a bronze basin was found on Castle Island,¹³² and it has also produced a dendrochronology date of AD 855 ± 9 years.

¹³⁰ This island, known locally as 'Turgesius Island' as well as an impressive ringfort named 'Turgesius Fort' on the hill to the west is linked in local folklore with the *uber*-Viking Turgesius, fabled to have ravaged the midlands with his fleet in the tenth century AD. In fact, he was portrayed as Brian Boraimhe's arch-enemy in the twelfth-century saga, *Cogadh Gaedhel re Gallaibh* for reasons of political propaganda by the Uí Briain dynasty.

¹³¹ Farrell, 'The Crannog Archaeological Project (CAP), Republic of Ireland II: Lough Lene'; My site description is based on my own underwater survey of the crannog carried out in August 1998.

¹³² The bell is illustrated in O'Sullivan, *Crannogs*, p. 30; it probably dates to the ninth to tenth-century AD.



Fig. 6.13 View of Lough Lene, Co. Westmeath from north. There are two natural islands, Turgesius Island and Nun's Island. The small islet to the west (towards distant shore) is Castle Island, a rocky cairn crannog dendrochronologically dated to the ninth century AD that has produced ecclesiastical metalwork (a bronze basin and hand-bell) and may have been a 'church crannog'.

Comparing Westmeath's crannogs with sites in other regions, Ulster and Connacht

It is possible to briefly compare the morphology, size and architectural features of the Westmeath crannogs with other regions. In Ulster, archaeological surveys in Monaghan, Down, Fermanagh, Donegal and Cavan provide some useful comparative information on cairn composition, size and form. In Monaghan, crannogs are also predominantly circular or oval cairns or platforms.¹³³ Most (i.e. 49 sites, 66 per cent) crannogs were built as cairns of boulders, stones and pebbles, although there were also several mounds of ash, charcoal, earth and wood (15 sites, 20 per cent). They range widely in size, with diameter/lengths of 5-46m. However, despite this variation, 43 (58 per cent) of the sites measure between 10-20m in diameter. There is some archaeological evidence that these small to medium-sized cairns date to the Late Bronze Age and the early medieval period. For example, a small, circular cairn (14m diameter) at Drummond Otra (Loughnaglack) and a slightly larger circular cairn (25m diameter) at Monaltyduff (Monaltyduff Lough) have both produced a Late Bronze Age hoard, as well as classic early medieval pins and tools.¹³⁴ Monaghan also has the larger crannogs, with 15 (20 per cent) sites measuring

¹³³ Brindley, *Monaghan*, has little information on crannog dimensions, making it difficult to quantify the percentages of low platforms, low-cairns and high-cairns.

¹³⁴ Lucas, 'National Museum of Ireland: Archaeological acquisitions in the year 1965' in *R.S.A.I. Jn*,

20-40m in diameter, these probably being early medieval or late medieval in date. They includes the large, circular crannog (46m NS, 41m EW in diameter) on Lough Ooney, situated close to the shore, a probable early medieval royal site.¹³⁵

In Cavan, crannogs are either mounds of timber, stone and earth (34 per cent), or cairns of stone (26 per cent).¹³⁶ The mounds were constructed of layers of ash, sand, gravel, deposited on foundations of twigs, small branches, and larger beams and logs (occasionally arranged in criss-cross or radial patterns, with the gaps infilled with sands and clay). The cairns of stone were usually placed on similar basal deposits of organic materials. They tend to be circular (64 sites, 45 per cent), oval (20 sites, 14 per cent) or sub-circular (5 sites, 3 per cent), although irregular (10 sites, 7 per cent), rectangular (13 sites, 9 per cent) or even triangular (4 sites, 3 per cent) islands are known. They ranged widely in size, with diameter/lengths between 5-45m,¹³⁷ although as many as 90 (81 per cent) of the sites measured were between 10-30m in diameter, by 1-1.5m in height. In general, the Cavan crannogs tend to be small to medium-sized cairns and platforms. However, there are also a smaller number of much larger sites, with 9 (8 per cent) sites (measuring between 30-40m diameter, by 1.5-3m in height. In Donegal, crannogs are also predominantly small, low cairns and islets of stone.¹³⁸ They tend to be constructed on natural shoals, bedrock reefs and off peninsulas. They range in size between 9-29m in diameter, by 1-2m in height. In plan, they are either circular (23 per cent), or oval (23 per cent), although irregular or elongated islets are also known. The largest is a crannog at Carrickrory, on Lough Ultan, a large oval cairn (29 x 15m), enclosed by a stone kerb on its NNW side.

Palisades, revetments, kerbs and walls in Westmeath: enclosing and excluding *Introduction*

In the early medieval settlement landscape, the enclosing elements of dwelling sites (e.g. the ditches and banks of ringforts, the walls of upland enclosures, or the *vallum* of

pp 93-159.

¹³⁵ Lough Oony is referred to on three occasions in the *Annals of Ulster* (i.e. *A.U.* 719.8, 851.6, 1025.5). In *A.U.* 851.6, the entry reads 'Cairell son of Ruaidri, king of Loch Uaithne was deceitfully killed by the Conaille of Fernmag before the oratory of Tigernach in Cluain Eóis'; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 151, suggests that the seat of kingship of the Uí Nad Slúaig kings of Fernmag in the ninth century was on Loch Uaithne (Lough Oony) although he was unable to identify the site. In fact, it is highly likely that the early medieval royal seat was the larger of the two crannogs identified on this lake, see Brindley, *Monaghan*, p. 16, site no. 129.

¹³⁶ O'Donovan, *Cavan*, pp 175-90; This survey, unfortunately, didn't involve many site visits, so assessing morphological features of crannogs is difficult.

¹³⁷ O'Donovan, *Cavan*, pp 175-90, also includes six narrow islands on Lough Ramor measuring 70-100m in length. These are most probably natural islands, albeit some are obviously enhanced.

monastic enclosures) were structural features of unusual social and symbolic significance.¹³⁹ These banks and ditches, palisades or walls physically demarcated a private space or an internal area to which access could be controlled or denied. They also served to exclude outsiders and often seemed to have been a means of defining social groups, both in terms of social status (nobles and wealthy households), kinship (defining family homesteads) or social role (i.e. clerics within monastic enclosures).

Recent archaeological surveys of crannogs in Westmeath indicate the use of various different enclosing features. In fact, a detailed analysis also reveals a surprising diversity in the form of enclosing elements constructed on crannogs used in the early medieval period elsewhere, in the north midlands, south Ulster, east (i.e. Meath) and Connacht. On some sites, there is little visible sign of a built enclosing feature and it is possible that the physical boundary between land and water, the waterline, sufficed to demarcate and define the island's edge. Otherwise, a common enclosing element is the inner wooden palisade (of planks, stakes or roundwood posts) situated immediately around the cairn's edge. This palisade may have served as a simple low revetment (if driven to only shallow depths of 50cm to 1m into the deposits so that they could not have stood high above the cairn edge) or as a high enclosing fence of post-and-wattle or planks (if set deeply in the ground up to 2-3m down, thus potentially standing to a potential height 6m). The posts in these palisades can be closely spaced or widely spaced, presenting quite different views to the observer. Another form of inner retaining feature can also be a low stone kerb of heavy boulders laid around the cairn edge at the water-line. There are also enclosing features that present a more substantial image to the outside viewer. They can include a large stone-built wall or cashel around the edge of the site, often standing several metres in height. Other enclosing features appear to have no structural role, but were intended to present a 'wall' out in the water. Outer wooden palisades, usually of roundwood posts, can be constructed out in the water surrounding the island, often at a distance of 10-15 metres from the edge of the cairn. On some crannogs, a similar stone 'breakwater' can be identified in the shallows around the island.

Westmeath

¹³⁸ Brian Lacey, *Archaeological survey of County Donegal* (Lifford, 1983), pp 104-7.

¹³⁹ Charles Doherty, 'The monastic town in early medieval Ireland' in H.B. Clarke and A. Simms (eds.), *The comparative history of urban origins in non-Roman Europe* (Oxford, 1985), pp 45-75; Michael Herity, 'The building and layout of early Irish monasteries before the year 1000' in *Monastic Studies*, 14 (1983), pp 274-84; Cathy Swift, 'Forts and fields: a study of 'monastic towns' in seventh and eighth century Ireland' in *J. Ir. Archaeol.*, 9 (1998), pp 105-26.

In the north midlands, in Westmeath, of the 64 sites recorded in this study, 31 (48.4 per cent) crannogs are enclosed within some type of bounding feature, including stone kerbs, inner wooden palisades, and occasionally by outer wooden palisades (see above). On Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath, of the 18 crannogs recorded by this author (see Appendix 2), 5 (28 per cent) have a visible enclosing feature.

Wooden palisades, typically taking the form of a circle of vertical wooden posts situated at the cairn's edge, are fairly common and have been found at the early medieval crannogs of Cróinis, Coolure Demesne 1, Johnstown, Dryderstown, Clonickilvant, Twyford, Ballinderry No. 1, Knockaville and Newtownlow. On these sites, there are 2-3 rows of these posts, planks and piles, suggesting either a multiple palisade or (more probably) multi-period activity. It is likely that some palisades are evidence for the reconstruction of a earlier, rotting wooden fence. These vertical posts served both to retain the cairn, and perhaps as a high fence around its edge. It is also true that these palisades are not always continuous or uniform in appearance around a site, but frequently change in character depending what sector of the site they are on. At Newtownlow, the wooden palisade on the east side of the site is a double row of planks with horizontal timbers lying beside them, while on the west side there is an irregular post and plank palisade dated to the tenth century AD. On Lough Derravarragh, there are only two crannogs with a visible wooden palisade. At Coolure Demesne 1, this is a double (or inner and outer) post and plank revetment around the edge of the cairn. Although some of these planks have collapsed outwards with the weight of the stone, many are still upright, presenting their flat sides to the lake. Viewed from the lake (the planks are not present on the shore-side of the crannog), they would have given the island an impressive wooden-walled facade.

It has been already been noted that some early medieval crannogs in the north midlands have an enigmatic 'outer palisade', situated 10-15m out into the water.¹⁴⁰ These outer palisades are usually constructed of closely spaced, roundwood posts, driven into the lakebed offshore of the island, but separated from it by distances of between 10-20m. They create an enclosing, horseshoe shaped arc, curving contiguously around the island. They are always situated on the lakeward side of the crannog, with the open gap of the 'horse-shoe' facing towards the shoreline and the land. Intriguingly, they enclose only water (rather than land), and they often stand in 2-3m of water today.

¹⁴⁰ This type of outer palisade on early medieval crannogs was first identified and discussed by E.

In Westmeath, these outer palisades have been recorded on early medieval crannogs at Cróinis and Goose Island (on Lough Ennell), where they have been dated to the mid-ninth century AD. An outer palisade was also found on the crannog at Tonymore North, Lough Kinale, Co. Longford.¹⁴¹ This early medieval crannog (it has dendrochronological dates of AD 818 and 1183) was a pear-shaped cairn (c.36m x 26m) of stone (sandstone and silt stones) and timber built on the end of shoal in the lake. The crannog had probably been first occupied in the sixth century, while there was clearly also activity in the eighth century, and in the ninth to twelfth century. Dendrochronological dating indicated that there was some building activity on the island at AD 1107 ± 9 years or later.¹⁴² Its uppermost occupation layer was constructed of small angular stones and larger stones laid on a framework of large timbers, retained within an inner oak plank palisade (in the eastern sector, there were indications of an earlier palisade phase deep in the mud). There was evidence for repair in the southern sector, where brushwood had been laid down at a place where the palisade had buckled outwards. There was also extensive deposits of brushwood and wattle on the lakebed (which was soft and mucky) at the southwestern sector. The crannog also had an outer roundwood palisade (10m offshore) enclosing it, though again this had a gap towards the shore. Interestingly, it is possible that the early medieval Ballinderry crannog No. 2. Co. Offaly also had an outer palisade.¹⁴³

These outer palisades could be interpreted in several ways. They may have been practical in intent, wooden breakwaters designed to prevent stormy waves from crashing against the sides of the crannog (although the inner revetment and stones would already achieve some protection). It is also possible that they are a militarily defensive fortification, preventing attackers from landing on the island by boat, and forcing them to come around from the landward side. However, as well as achieving these aims, they also do something else. On early medieval ringforts, multivallation (i.e the use of several concentric banks and ditches) appears to have been socially significant. However, it was

Kelly 'Observations on Irish crannogs'.

¹⁴¹ The early medieval crannog at Tonymore North, Co. Longford has produced such finds as a sixth-century bronze metal frame, as well as six pins of ninth to twelfth century date. This collection included a ringed pin, a crutch-headed pin, a globular-headed stick pin, as well as the shafts of two further pins. Other early medieval finds included a leaf-shaped iron spearhead, a perforated L-shaped piece of bronze, and a tinned bronze binding strip. The most notable find was an eighth-century bookshrine. Finds during the CAP survey included a wooden cask head, an iron plough coulter and a iron plough share and a twelfth century disc-headed stick pin.

¹⁴² Farrell, et al 'The Crannog Archaeological project (CAP), Republic of Ireland I', pp. 129-135; Kelly 'Observations on Irish lake dwellings', p. 89; Dave Brown, pers. comm.

¹⁴³ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannóg no. 2'; Eamonn Kelly pers. comm. It is interesting that the massive dug-out boat found at the south edge of the crannog could more easily have floated there, and

the scale and size of their *ramparts* that signified status, as multivallate ringforts rarely have a larger internal enclosed space than the average ringfort.

Thence, for example, a king was expected in early Irish law to produce a sufficient labour force to build impressive concentric banks and ditches on his *rath* or *dún*. The eighth-century law text, *Crith Gablach* states that 'it is then that he is a king, when labour-dues of base clients surround him' and goes on to define this labour due as a measured portion of the rampart and ditch. Thence, it is clear that it was the labour expended and the significance of the building event itself that signified status.¹⁴⁴ On early medieval crannogs, the inner and outer palisades, and the narrow (but deep) stretches of water they enclosed, may also have fulfilled a social and ideological role, marking noble status through a multiplicity of boundaries.

Other enclosing features on Westmeath crannogs include stone walls or kerbs (often found along with other palisades and revetments). On Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath, of the eighteen crannogs recorded by this author (see Appendix 2), 5 (28 per cent) have a visible enclosing feature. On 3 of these crannogs (Kiltoom 5-7), this is a low, kerb (1m width, 50cm in height) running around the edge of the cairn, constructed of large, heavy boulders. These large stones used in the kerb contrast greatly with the small size of the stone and cobbles found elsewhere in these cairns, confirming that these are deliberate constructions. Stone kerbs are also found on two small early medieval crannogs at Cullenhugh (Lough Iron), and also along parts of the islands of Nun's Island, Derrynagarragh and Kilrush Lower.

These stone kerbs are intriguing. Although the heavy stones at the water's edge could have protected the crannog's inhabitants from storms and waves, they also achieve by sleight of hand an interesting architectural trick of the eye. When these small crannogs are viewed from further inland, they appear to be low-lying, stony platforms defined at their edges by small stones. In total contrast, when viewed from a boat out on the lake, their stone kerbs give them the appearance of massively built rocky islets. They may therefore be deliberate architectural features designed to enhance the perception of these islands, depending on the location of the viewer. People moving down the lake by boat from the early medieval crannog at Coolure would have seen these islets and may have been misled as to their actual size.

thence may be 'inside' a wooden dock created by the outer palisade.

¹⁴⁴ Binchy (ed.), *Crith Gablach*, 45, l. 566-72; MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish law', p. 305; Stout, *The Irish ringfort* p. 113; Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland*, p. 150.

Ulster

In Ulster, archaeological surveys in Monaghan, Down, Fermanagh, Donegal and Cavan reveal the use of stone kerbs, wooden revetments, palisades and stone walls. In Monaghan, 18 sites (24 per cent) had some visible enclosing feature.¹⁴⁵ A stone kerb was identified on 8 (11 per cent) sites. Wooden piles around the cairn edges were identified on 14 (19 per cent) sites. A definite wooden palisade of oak planks was seen on only 3 (4 per cent) sites. Interestingly, some crannogs (e.g. Coaghen, Corloughroe, Kilcorran) had both a stone kerb and wooden piles at the cairn's edge, and these were often only visible on part of the site. There were also a small number of crannogs that had both the inner and outer wooden palisade. At Mullatishaughlin, on Hollywood Lake, Co. Monaghan, a circular mound of clay, brushwood and stone was enclosed within a double ring of upright piles.¹⁴⁶ In Cavan, 30 sites (21 per cent) had a visible enclosing feature.¹⁴⁷ Stone kerbs are identifiable on 8 (6 per cent) sites and a stone wall on 1 site. Wooden piles at the cairn edge were identified on 18 (13 per cent) sites. A plank palisade was recorded on only 3 (2 per cent) crannogs. At one of these, at Killyvally, on Lough Oughter, Co. Cavan, a substantial cairn (27.4m diam., 2.4m ht.) constructed at the end of a granite outcrop was enclosed within a double ring of close-set piles. The outer palisade was between 14-18 m from the cairn.¹⁴⁸ In Donegal, 6 (35 per cent) crannogs had a visible enclosing feature.¹⁴⁹ Reflecting the common construction of cashels on islands and rock-outcrops across the west, 2 (12 per cent) were stone kerbs, while on 4 (24 per cent) sites it was a low stone wall, occasionally confined to one part of the island.

Connacht

In Connacht, archaeological surveys in Galway, Mayo and Sligo also seem to indicate that the use of stone in crannog building strongly influenced the choice of enclosing feature. There are at least 266 crannogs in Mayo, but few regional surveys have been published.¹⁵⁰ In south Mayo, (on Carrownacon Lough, Lough Carra, Lough Corrib and Lough Mask) crannogs were retained within stone revetments (3 sites), wooden piles (4 sites) and breakwaters (3 sites). At Carrownacon, a crannog had all three features - a

¹⁴⁵ Brindley, *Monaghan*, pp 13-17.

¹⁴⁶ Brindley, *Monaghan*, p. 16.

¹⁴⁷ O'Donovan, *Cavan*, pp 175-90.

¹⁴⁸ O'Donovan, *Cavan*, p. 187.

¹⁴⁹ Lacey, *Donegal*, pp 104-7.

¹⁵⁰ M. Gibbons, O. Alcock, T. Condit and M. Tunney, 'Some observations on the sites and monuments record of County Mayo' in *Cathair na Mart*, 11, no. 1 (1991), pp 1-19.

stone revetment, piles at the east and southwest sides as well as three timber planks. Some crannogs also had a stone breakwater further out in the water, usually on the lakeward side of the island.¹⁵¹ Also in south Mayo, recent surveys of six crannogs on Levallinree Lough indicate that 3 (50 per cent) are enclosed by a wooden pile palisade. A particularly impressive early medieval crannog (dendrochronologically dated to AD 609-610) was enclosed within a double palisade of split oak posts driven into the silty lakebed.¹⁵² In west Galway, of the 23 crannogs or lake dwellings surveyed,¹⁵³ 17 (74 per cent) have a recognisable enclosing feature. 11 (48 per cent) sites are essentially island cashels, with an enclosing dry-stone wall such as at Lough na Scannive, where there are at least three forts on small islets.¹⁵⁴ Similar island cashels are also found on Lough Carra, Co. Mayo¹⁵⁵ and on Lough Cullen, Co. Mayo.¹⁵⁶ On 5 (22 per cent) sites the enclosing feature was a low kerb of boulders, occasionally serving as a stone revetment at the edge of the island. Only on one crannog, at Gortacarnaun, on Lough Naneevin, was a wooden palisade definitely identified.¹⁵⁷ In north Galway, stone walls, kerbs and wooden palisades also appear to be rare if non-existent.¹⁵⁸ In south Galway, archaeological excavations and surveys of 13 crannogs on Loughrea also indicate a diversity of enclosing elements.¹⁵⁹

Interpreting palisades and walls

Traditionally, it has been thought that the defining characteristic of the crannog is the vertical wooden palisade, built to retain the body of the cairn or to serve as a defensive stockade. Certainly, on some of the well-known early medieval sites, wooden palisades were amongst the most striking features uncovered in excavations (Fig. 6.14). At Ballinderry crannog No. 1, an impressive post palisade enclosed the site, and was replaced by an oak pile palisade (up to 30cm in diameter). At Lagore, there was certainly a sequence of palisades of piles, posts and planks constructed across time.

¹⁵¹ Lavelle, *Ballinrobe and district*, pp. 47-8.

¹⁵² This crannog was possibly an early medieval royal or high-status crannog, and has also produced iron tools and four dug-out boats; C. Lawless, R. O'Floinn, M. Baillie and D. Brown, 'Levallinree crannóg' in *Cathair na Mart*, 9 (1989), pp 21-5.

¹⁵³ Gosling, *West Galway*, pp 32-36.

¹⁵⁴ Layard, 'Fortified stone lake-dwellings on islands in Lough Skannive', pp 373-8.

¹⁵⁵ Lavelle, *Ballinrobe and district*, pp. 47-8.

¹⁵⁶ Layard 'On a fortified stone lake-dwelling on an island in Lough Cullen', pp 32-4.

¹⁵⁷ In the 1860s, Kinahan excavated this oval shaped cairn of brushwood, earth and stone and showed that it was retained within a roundwood palisade; Kinahan, 'Notes on a crannóg in Lough Naneevin', pp. 31-3.

¹⁵⁸ Alcock, *et al*, *North Galway*, pp. 29-32; relatively little information is included in this survey on cairn edges.

¹⁵⁹ Kinahan, 'On crannoges in Lough Rea', pp 412-27; Kevin McDonald, *The lake dwellings of Ireland with specific reference to Loughrea, Co. Galway*. Unpublished BA dissertation, NUI Galway. (Galway, n.d.).



Fig. 6.14 Early medieval palisade on Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Offaly. In Westmeath, crannogs have a range of enclosing features and boundaries, including inner and outer palisades, kerbs and stone walls. It is probable that all of these were socially significant, physically and symbolically demarcating it and defining the island space occupied by the social group.

At Moynagh Lough, there is also a sequence of at least two post and plank palisades in the seventh and eighth century. On occasion, the palisade may have been intended to convey an ability to use high-status timber, particularly oak timber. At the early medieval crannog of Rathinaun, Co. Sligo, the Period IV crannog mound (probably dated to the seventh century AD) was enclosed by a stout revetment of horizontal logs, held in position by two rows of squared oak posts running along the eastern side of the crannog (facing the land). Interestingly, this solid revetment was not used on the western side, where only oak roundwood piles were driven into the marls. In other words, the strongest defences faced towards the land, presenting a visually impressive palisade towards the shoreline.

It is even possible that such palisades were coloured or stained (with lime-wash or white clay) to enhance their visibility. In the early medieval tale, *Echtra Thaidg mheic Chéin*, there is a description of a probable ecclesiastical crannog on a lake in a fantastic island, where the crannog's palisade itself was a key distinguishing feature that also prevented people from observing the interior.

'This island's name, what is it?' 'Thou askest that thou knowest already'. 'But', said Teigue, 'I know not whether it be the same tale with thee and with her whom previously we have addressed.' 'The same verily,' she said: 'inis derglocha or 'red loch island' is this one's name; because of a red loch that is in it, containing an island surrounded by a palisade of gold, its name being *Inis Patmos*, in which all saints and righteous that have served God. These latter, men's eyes never have beheld, for between radiance of the divinity and the constant discourse which God

and the Angels hold with them, our vision may not dwell or impinge upon them'.¹⁶⁰

However, the archaeological surveys discussed above also reveal that such wooden palisades may be quite unusual, perhaps even fairly rare. This does not always signify social status, as both high-status and low-status sites have these palisades. While it is likely that the use of heavy oak planks or trunks in a palisade (the piles in Ballinderry no. 2 were up to 30cm diameter) appears to be limited to early medieval high-status or even 'royal' crannogs, wooden palisades are also known from small sites such as Craigywarren, Bofeenaun and Sroove.

The use of stone kerbs and even walls also indicates that other boundary features were used on early medieval crannogs, occasionally in an ingenious way to manipulate how an island was perceived and experienced by outsiders. The small early medieval crannogs at Kiltoom were bounded by a 'chain' or kerbed revetment of stone, with only small stones on the landward side and a heavy boulder kerb on the watery side. The discovery that stone kerbs vary in appearance around the edge of an island also recalls the fact that many wooden palisades on crannogs are also discontinuous around their perimeter in size, construction and raw materials, presenting different views and images depending from what angle they are viewed. The use of stone walls also raises the question of the academic distinction in classification between crannogs and island cashels. There is at least one early medieval island cashel in Westmeath, the fortification on Cherry Island, in Lough Ennell, known in early medieval sources as *Inis na Cairrge* and associated with the kings of Fir Tulach. This is not generally thought of as a crannog, but to the early medieval Irish, it was a fortress on an island in a lake.

It is now also clear that from these archaeological surveys that many crannogs may have been bounded by other, less tangible or invisible features, such as the water itself. It has already been suggested that islands were seen in the early medieval imagination as distinct bounded spaces, defined at their edges by a physical or mental edge or boundary. This edge was often crucially important in protecting the island's inhabitants from physical or spiritual danger, or retaining within the island, those monsters or communities that it would be preferable to avoid. However, it is interesting that in the early medieval literature, the physical character of this boundary could be quite variable, at its most elemental level including the *natural edge* provided by a cliff, beach

¹⁶⁰ Standish O'Grady, *Silva Gadelica (I.-XXXI)* (2 vols. London, 1892), vol. 1, p. 391.



Fig. 6.15 This small, low-cairn crannog at Derrya 1, Lough Derravarragh is accessed by a narrow causeway of stones. This pathway does not come out from the closest shoreline, but instead appears to deliberately lead a person to it from a more distant part of the shoreline, thus providing him with a constant view of the nearby early medieval royal crannog at Coolure Demesne 1 across the water.

or even the water-line itself. On those crannogs where a palisade or wall is not evident, customary practice and an awareness of space may have sufficed to 'edge the island'.

Causeways and pathways in Westmeath: journeying and arriving

Westmeath

Causeways, landing stages, jetties and harbours, are all features on crannogs that essentially facilitated, while they simultaneously regulated, access to the site. In Westmeath, causeways are occasional although not frequent on its crannogs (although many undoubtedly have them submerged underwater). At Cullenhugh, on Lough Iron, two small, low-cairn crannogs are attached together by a stone causeway. At Nun's Island, on Lough Lene, a substantial stone causeway runs southwards from the island towards the large natural island of Turgesius Island, although this may be a natural shoal. A small, low-mound crannog at Culleenbeg is attached to the shoreline by an apparent causeway, 18m in length.

On Lough Derravarragh, Co. Westmeath, causeways can be identified on eight (44 per cent) sites, mostly in Kiltoom townland at the northeast shore of the lake. At Kiltoom 6, 7, 8, these were all short, narrow pathways (8-12m in length, by 50cm-1m in width),

constructed in quite shallow water (50cm-1m), usually built of a double row of flat, limestone slabs. Although they tend to approach crannogs more or less directly, a few tend to come at a particular angle, not necessarily taking the shortest route out from the shoreline. At Derrya 1, a small low-cairn crannog is not attached to the nearest part of the shoreline (9m to north), as the stone causeway runs off to the northwest, altering direction as it goes, before it hits the shoreline at 18m distance (Fig. 6.15). At Donore 1, a small high-cairn crannog was apparently (and strangely) connected to the distant, northwest shore of the lake by a wooden 'causeway' of posts. This may well have been a barrier to river traffic on the River Inny, in the manner of an early medieval ship barrier (Fig. 6.16). There are other natural islets around this shoreline that are also attached to the drylands by small stone causeways, effectively making them crannogs. At Kiltoom 10, there is a large, wide causeway of stones that may well be based over a natural, bedrock ridge. A Late Bronze Age sword was found beside this causeway, raising the possibility that the feature is prehistoric. Interestingly, causeways are rare on the crannogs of Lough Ennell, where only two (7 per cent) crannogs appear to be linked to the shore by broad, possibly even natural ridges. It is possible that this is due to the fact that most of the lake's crannogs are well out in the water.



Fig. 6.16 Donore 1 crannog, a high-cairn site in shallow water at the boggy northwest end of Lough Derravarragh. The site appears to have been connected to the Clonava Island shoreline by a wooden 'causeway' of rows of posts, running for 600m to the northwest. (Source: National Museum of Ireland Top. Files, Derrya, 1968:197).

Ulster

In Ulster, a few causeways have been clearly identified. In Donegal, a crannog in Brockagh Lough had a causeway at the north end of the islet, leading out towards the mainland.¹⁶¹ In Cavan, only 2 crannogs had a causeway. This included a small crannog at Drumheel (Lough Oughter), that was reached from the shoreline by a long (23m in length), narrow causeway of small to medium sized stones.¹⁶² In Monaghan, they are also infrequent. However at Annagose, a circular stone cairn was certainly joined directly to the shoreline by a clearly built causeway 15m in length.¹⁶³

Connacht

In Connacht, causeways are typically associated with stone-built islets and island cashels. In north Galway, stone causeways are found on 6 (33 per cent) sites. They occasionally run out from the shoreline indirectly, or alter direction along their length, before they connect with the crannog.¹⁶⁴ In west Galway, causeways are found on 6 (26 per cent) sites. At one site, an island cashel at Beaghcauneen on Loch Fada, a 'well-preserved stone causeway (w. 1.15m) running SW from the island for 21.3m before turning S for 3.7m, connects to the shore'.¹⁶⁵ In south Galway, on Loughrea, causeways were found on only 2 (15 per cent) sites. In south Mayo, crannogs with causeways are similarly rare. There are apparently almost none on either Lough Carra¹⁶⁶ or on Levallinree Lough, Co. Mayo.¹⁶⁷

Interpreting causeways

These stone and wooden causeways provide an intriguing insight into what people were attempting to do in regulating access to their islands. A traditional view of them would be that they were built to provide a measure of physical security and defensiveness, by means of the way that they enforce a stranger to move by an uncertain and tricky route to the islet. However, they are also interesting in social and ideological terms. They reveal how people controlled and regulated access to a site, protecting its inaccessibility and the 'social distance' that they were trying to achieve. At a day to day level, they

¹⁶¹ Lacey, *Donegal*, p. 104.

¹⁶² O'Donovan, *Cavan* p. 184.

¹⁶³ Brindley, *Monaghan* p. 13, pl. 2

¹⁶⁴ Alcock, *et al North Galway*, pp 29-32.

¹⁶⁵ Gosling, *West Galway*, p. 33.

¹⁶⁶ Lavelle, *Ballinrobe and district*, pp 47-8.

¹⁶⁷ Lawless *et al*, 'Levallinree crannóg', pp 21-5; C. Lawless, 'Levallinree townland and Lough, an ancient citadel, fulachta fiadh, crannógs, dugout canoes, ringforts, hutsites, St. Patrick's stone, mill and mill-race and famine gardens' in *Cathair na Mart*, 16 (1996), pp 17-44; C. Lawless, 'Turlough, Co. Mayo – a landscape study' in Kevin Barton and Karen Molloy (eds.), *South Central Mayo Field Guide No. 22, Irish Association for Quaternary Studies* (Dublin, 1998), pp 20-9.

also worked to provide their own inhabitants with access to the crannog, but even here it is worth thinking about how people's habitual movements probably lead to these causeways being built. For example, on Lough Derravarragh, it is possible to show that they occasionally enforce movement towards the crannog from a particular direction and provide a person with a particular perspective of the island (and the lake behind). They may have been oriented to run directly to a gate or even the door of a house. Interestingly, however, at Sroove phase 2, the doorway was not opposite the causeway, but off to one side of the island.¹⁶⁸

Inevitably, causeways are most commonly identified beside crannogs constructed in shallow water or close to the shoreline. Most are quite short, narrow, stone pathways that simply move across shallow, knee-deep water up to the islet. Some were constructed of rows of wooden posts, perhaps supporting a plank or wattle walkway.¹⁶⁹ There are hints that some causeways were designed to limit access or protect against surprise visits. They are often slightly lower (i.e. 10cm) than the cairn they approach, so they could have been submerged under 10-20cm of water when in use, and thus only partly visible. Some approach their crannog at a slight tangential angle (i.e. not moving out to it directly from the most obvious point on the nearest shoreline). Others bend or change direction slightly somewhere along their length, turning at angles of up to 45 degrees. A few are even constructed in a strikingly zigzag fashion, perhaps to baffle and slow the approach of a person unfamiliar with its course.¹⁷⁰

In deeper water, it can be difficult to distinguish between natural linear shoals (often marked by reed beds) and deliberately built causeways, particularly if they are submerged (and crannogs are often constructed on such shoals). However, some crannogs in deep water are occasionally approached by relatively substantial causeways. At a possible medieval crannog on Templehouse Lough, Co. Sligo, a massive stone and earthen causeway twists violently in its approach to the island, while in its size it probably incorporates more material than the crannog itself.¹⁷¹ Some are evidently early medieval in date. At the ninth-century crannog at Lough More, Co. Mayo, a causeway of vertical stakes, horizontal oak beams and stone flags (pinned into position with sharpened stakes) crossed a wet, marshy area to the islet. It may even have been

¹⁶⁸ Fredengren *Crannogs*, pp 28-32.

¹⁶⁹ Wood-Martin, *Traces of the elder faiths*, p. 223.

¹⁷⁰ Raftery, 'Lake-dwellings in Ireland', pp. 5-15

¹⁷¹ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, p 161.

originally submerged and invisible to view.¹⁷² At Sroove, Co. Sligo, an early medieval crannog was constructed on top of an earlier stone causeway and this was then used to provide access to the site.¹⁷³ The early medieval crannog at Ballynahinch (Lough Nahinch), Co. Tipperary also had a stone causeway leading to the shore, although this may have been enhanced in the nineteenth century.¹⁷⁴ On other hand, on some crannogs in Connemara and Donegal, causeways are likely to be late medieval in origins, while the incidence of modern duck-hides on many crannogs might indicate that the causeways were only constructed in the nineteenth or twentieth centuries. However there is plenty of evidence to suggest that they are contemporary with the early medieval use of these islets.

Landing stages, harbours and jetties in Westmeath

Introduction

It appears that people intended other crannogs to be rather more remote and inaccessible, as can be seen by their distance from the shoreline, the depth of water surrounding them and the lake bottom conditions (i.e. soft muds are more difficult to walk across than a stony lakebed). In other words, most sites located at a reasonable distance from the shore, or in deep water that cannot be easily waded through, would have to be travelled to by boat. The archaeological evidence for boat travel to crannogs includes the boats themselves, as well as the landing stages, jetties and places for securing dug-out boats, coracles or plank boats that have also occasionally been found on crannogs. These landing places are typically simple structures, usually built of low stone walls or of rows of wooden posts. However, it is possible that more complex wooden docks and jetties existed, as can be seen on some excavated early medieval crannogs.

Westmeath

In Westmeath, stone-built and wooden landing places have been identified on several crannogs. On Goose Island, (Lough Ennell) and Coolure Demesne 1 (Lough Derravarragh), see Appendix 2), there are small boat 'nausts' constructed by creating a narrow, shallow depression (3-4m in length, 2m in width) on the stony surface. These 'nausts' face out into the lake and could have held narrow boats above and back from damage by the waves at the water's edge. On a few sites, rather more complex landing

¹⁷² Keane, 'Lough More, Co. Mayo'. pp 167-82.

¹⁷³ Fredegren, *Crannog*, pp 223-5; A potentially interesting alternative explanation of this causeway is that it is the remnants of an abandoned early medieval crannog building project.

¹⁷⁴ Trench and Kinahan, 'a crannog in Lough Nahinch' p. 177; Cahalan and Hyland, 'Lough Nahinch

places were constructed. On Cróinis, on Lough Ennell, there is a distinctive, rectangular stonewalled harbour on the east (lakeward) side of the island. This is possibly an early medieval structure, as there are eleventh century timbers and metalwork in the vicinity and it has been suggested that the surface of the crannog dates to this period.¹⁷⁵ On the other hand, there is also a strong possibility that it is a late medieval feature related to the fifteenth century towerhouse on the island, or it may even be a modern fisheries boat harbour. On Cherry Island, on the opposite side of the Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath, there is a spectacular harbour on the north side of the island cashel. This was a rectangular, stone-lined pool (c.10m length, 6m in width) that could have held substantial, ocean-going wooden ships rather than small dugouts. At Ballinderry crannog No. 1, Co. Westmeath, a substantial slipway of oak planks overlaid by peat and brushwood was found in the pile palisade at the northwest side of the site. There was also a possible boat jetty on the west side of Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath.

In south Ulster, landing places have been identified on a few sites. In Donegal, 3 (18 per cent) stone-built crannog cairns have produced landing stages, including two small stone piers on a crannog at Lackagh (Lough Pound), two stone-built projections on a crannog at Port (Port Lough) and a 'stone landing-stage' (2.5m x 1.9m) at Woodhill (Sessiagh Lake). In Monaghan, a crannog at Cladowen, on Bishop's Lough, had a possible jetty of wooden piles.¹⁷⁶ In Cavan, at Drumkeery Lough, a oval-shaped crannog (40m NS, c.25m EW) was enclosed within a 'stockade' of birch and oak piles. Its entrance (lined by vertical oak planks) was apparently to the south, while there was a landing place at the northeast (a double row of oak piles), while a dugout lay in the muds beside a second possible landing place (a narrow 'dock' defined by a double post row inside the crannog's interior).¹⁷⁷ In Down, a landing stage was identified on a single crannog at Loughaghery.¹⁷⁸

In south Connacht, landing places have been identified on significantly more crannogs and island cashels. In west Galway, 9 (39 per cent) sites have produced jetties, piers and

crannog'; Farrelly and O'Brien, *North Tipperary*, p. 53.

¹⁷⁵ This harbour may be even earlier in date, as it is situated directly opposite a distinct gap in the ninth-century outer palisade. However, its potential twelfth-century date is suggested by the fact the plank palisade at the water's edge has been dated to c. AD 1100-1125, while eleventh to twelfth-century bronze pins have been recovered from the crannog's surface; Farrell and Buckley, 'Loughs Ennell and Analla', pp 281-285; Kelly, 'Observations on Irish lake-dwellings', p. 89, fig. 4.

¹⁷⁶ Brindley, *Monaghan*, p. 83.

¹⁷⁷ Harkness, 'On a crannoge found in Drumkeery Lough', pp. 483-490; Wood-Martin, *lake dwellings*, pp 200-1; O'Donovan, *Cavan*, p. 185.

¹⁷⁸ Anon. *Down*, p. 184

slipways.¹⁷⁹ These are usually built of stone flags and project outwards from the island, providing a place for a boat to moor beside. Only at Tully More was there an internal feature, 'an artificial creek or port' opening through the wall of the stone enclosure on the island.¹⁸⁰ In north Galway, only one site, the late medieval 'crannog' of Lough Park has yet produced a landing place, a stone-lined jetty (3m in length) on its north side.¹⁸¹ In south Galway, Kinahan's original, and McDonald's more recent, investigations on Loughrea indicate the presence of a 'small harbour or docking area' (18.5m x 5m) defined by wooden posts on an early medieval crannog at Shore Island.¹⁸² In south Mayo, there seem not to have been any clearly defined landing places on the crannogs on Lough Carra or Levallinree.¹⁸³

Dugout boats

Westmeath

In the north midlands, few dugouts have been actually found on crannogs, although they are well known from lakes in the region (Fig. 6.17).¹⁸⁴ For example, there are at least four dugout boats on Lough Derravarragh, most of which probably date to the Middle Ages. On Lough Derravarragh, they are not particularly close to the lake's crannogs, but this is hardly surprising or significant (boats move around). However, archaeological excavations have also occasionally uncovered dugout boats on early medieval crannogs in Meath, Westmeath and Offaly, occasionally built into the foundations, such as at Lagore, Co. Meath¹⁸⁵ and Ballinderry crannog No. 2, Co. Offaly.¹⁸⁶ A small piece of a dug-out boat was also found in later deposits at Ballinderry crannog No. 1, Co. Westmeath.¹⁸⁷

Ulster

In Ulster, dugout boats have occasionally been identified on some crannogs during the county archaeological surveys. In Cavan, four (3 per cent) crannogs (i.e. at Cornagall, Derryvackny, Drumkeery, Tomassan) have produced dug-out boats. At Drumkeery, Co.

¹⁷⁹ Gosling, *West Galway*, p. 32-5.

¹⁸⁰ E.W. Lynam, 'Prehistoric monuments at Rinvyle, Co. Galway' in *R.S.A.I. Jn*, 52 (1922), pp 164-8; Gosling *West Galway*, p.35.

¹⁸¹ Alcock *et al*, *North Galway*, p. 31; Lyttleton, 'Loughpark 'crannog' re-visited', pp 151-83.

¹⁸² Kinahan, 'On crannoges in Lough Rea', pp 412-27 ; McDonald, Loughrea, p. 17.

¹⁸³ Lavelle *Ballinrobe and district*; C. Lawless *et al*, 'Levallinree crannóg'.

¹⁸⁴ N.T.N. Gregory, 'A comparative study of Irish and Scottish logboats'. Unpublished PhD thesis. (University of Edinburgh, 1997).

¹⁸⁵ Hencken, 'Lagore', pp 51-2, Fig. 1

¹⁸⁶ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog No. 2', pp. 33, 60.

¹⁸⁷ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog No. 1', p. 152.

Cavan one was found lying beside a landing place at the north-east end of the island.¹⁸⁸ In Down, at least three (10 per cent) crannogs (i.e. Ballylough, Creevylough, Loughadian) have produced dugout boats.¹⁸⁹ An unusually large boat was also found on the shores of Loughbrickland, Co. Down southwest of the large early medieval crannog on that lake. It was of a shape and size that suggests it could have carried heavy loads.¹⁹⁰

Connacht

In Connacht, dugouts have also been recorded on a few crannog sites. On the shores of Lough Gara, in Sligo and Roscommon, at least 17 dugouts were recorded when the lake was drained. A fine example was excavated on the edge of the early medieval crannog at Rathinaun, Co. Sligo.¹⁹¹ In south Mayo, the early medieval crannog on Levallinree Lough has four dugout boats lying around its cairn edge, one loaded with stone to keep it submerged.¹⁹² On Lough Carra, only one crannog, potentially abandoned during construction, also produced a dugout canoe.¹⁹³ Although no dugout boats are mentioned in the north or west Galway county surveys, at least four dugout boats were discovered in Loughrea, south Galway, particularly during Kinahan's excavations of a crannog at Island McHugo.¹⁹⁴

Interpreting the role and usage of dugout boats

While it is undeniable that most crannogs would have been reached by boat, this is not always directly reflected in the surviving or visible archaeological evidence. Firstly, just because people use a boat to travel to an island does not necessarily mean that they will *leave it there*. Early Irish saints' lives and narrative literature also hints that boats were often left at the mainland until they were needed.¹⁹⁵

¹⁸⁸ O'Donovan, *Cavan*, p. 189

¹⁸⁹ Anon., *An archaeological survey of County Down* (Belfast, 1966), pp 182-185.

¹⁹⁰ H.W. Lett, 'Ancient canoe found near Loughbrickland, Co. Down', *U.J.A.*, 1 (1895), pp 153-4; Malcolm Fry, *Coiti: Logboats from Northern Ireland* (Belfast, 2000), p. 71; In *A.F.M* 832, the crannog of Loughbrickland is mentioned in the entry 'The plundering of Loch-Bricrenn (*Orgain Locha Bricrem*), against Conghalach, son of Eochaidh [by the foreigners]; and he was taken prisoner and afterwards killed at their ships.' There is good archaeological and historical evidence that this site was occupied in the early medieval period and again in the sixteenth and seventeenth century.

¹⁹¹ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pl. 34.

¹⁹² Lawless *et al*, 'Levallinree crannóg', pp 22-3; Fry, *Coiti*, p.16, suggests that some dugouts were deliberately submerged to keep them permanently damp and thus prevent their cracking and destruction.

¹⁹³ Lavelle, 'Ballinrobe and district', p. 47.

¹⁹⁴ Wood-Martin, *Lake dwellings*, p. 228; Kinahan, 'On crannoges in Lough Rea', p. 412-27; Early medieval finds from this multi-period site include a sixth-century bucket handle with escutcheon; McDonald, Loughrea, p. 14.

¹⁹⁵ A dugout boat found on the shoreline opposite a crannog on Dullaghan Lough, Co. Tyrone was apparently moored to timbers and stakes and placed in a prepared anchorage within a dug channel in the lake muds; Fry, *Coiti*, p. 59; The saints' lives and narrative literature frequently describe the saint



Fig. 6.17 An early medieval dugout boat lying between the inner and outer palisade on the ninth century crannog of Ballinderry No. 2, Co. Offaly. In Westmeath, dugouts have been found around various lakeshores, particularly on Lough Derravarragh, providing both a means of access to crannogs and a way of controlling who could approach them.

Indeed, dugout boats have often been found on shorelines overlooking crannogs in lakes, although clear chronological or functional relationships between the two can rarely be established. There is also the problem that when dugout boats are lying on the shores of the crannog itself; they may not be identified during a conventional archaeological survey, as they will only be really revealed by underwater inspection or a site excavation. For example, there is a large, probable early medieval crannog on Lough O'Flynn, Co. Roscommon, with an impressive oak plank palisade enclosing a high stone cairn (finds including early medieval tools, pins and whetstones). There is no visible sign of any water craft, but there are actually as many as five dug-out boats lying at a water depth of about 1.5m on the lakebed around the site.¹⁹⁶

Dugout boats in Ireland vary in size and design, and range widely in date from prehistory to the post-medieval period (morphology alone can not be used to date them). Numerous examples have also been dated to the early medieval period.¹⁹⁷ In terms of their distribution, most are found on smaller lakes and rivers, generally avoiding stormy lakes and the coast.¹⁹⁸ In Northern Ireland, they are also found on some of the larger lakes, such as Lough Erne and Lough Neagh, although they tend to be sunk within small,

or hero as waiting on the shoreline at a 'port' or the 'jetty of the island' until a boat becomes available.

¹⁹⁶ Donal Boland, pers. comm.

¹⁹⁷ Lanting and Brindley, 'Irish logboats and their European context', pp 85-95; Fry, *Coiti*

¹⁹⁸ Una MacDowell's study of 275 well-provenanced dugouts from Ireland indicated that 116 (42 per cent) came from small lakes; Una MacDowell, 'Irish logboats'. Unpublished MA thesis, N.U.I. (Dept. of Archaeology, University College, Dublin, 1983).

sheltered bays and inlets. Interestingly, there seems to be little correlation between the size of the lake and the size of the boat, as quite complex and impressively large craft have been found on tiny lakes that have produced crannogs.¹⁹⁹ This might hint again that boats sometimes served as a symbol of wealth or status.

The use of boats to gain access on to at least some of these islands would have been another means of manipulating how people perceived them, as well as providing their inhabitants with an enhanced degree of 'social distance'. The use of a boat also enables the owner of a crannog to control the speed, direction and timing of a stranger's visit to an island, much more than on any other habitation site. It is worth remembering that while we today might have a mental image of everybody moving about these watery landscapes by dugout boat, it is unlikely that everybody in the community had access to such craft. Irish dugout boats are virtually always carved of massive oak trunks (of a diameter of at least 1.5m), the most legally valued and protected tree in the early medieval woodlands, to which access was clearly restricted. Early Irish laws describe various fines and penalties for felling oak trees, for removing branches or for stripping off their bark.²⁰⁰ Experimental archaeology has also revealed that carving dugout boats requires a heavy labour commitment as well as access to the suitable raw materials, and they may have been out of the reach of most people.²⁰¹ In other words, living on an island almost immediately puts one out of the reach of ordinary or poor people. On the other hand, it is clear that low-status crannogs, typically those in shallow water, were also intended to provide their inhabitants with a measure of social distance.

Conclusions

This chapter has described and interpreted the physical architecture of early medieval crannogs, and the social and ideological role of their cairns, palisades, causeways. It has also traced how they were built, altered and changed across time, and how people may have understood them, even after they were abandoned. The next chapter will cross the boundary of land and water, go into these sites and investigate the social organisation of space within early medieval crannogs.

¹⁹⁹ Fry, *Coiti*, pp. 59, 64, 71, 83, 86, 87, 107, 112, 115

²⁰⁰ O'Sullivan, 'The use of trees and woodland in early medieval Ireland', pp 674-81.

²⁰¹ A reasonably sized dugout boat (4m in length) hewn from a large oak trunk requires about 2 weeks continuous work by 2-3 skilled people. This labour estimate does not include the time for felling the tree, hauling it out of the woodlands, etc; Damian Goodburn and Mark Redknap, 'Replicas and wrecks from the Thames area' in *The London Archaeologist*, 6, no. 1 (1988), pp 7-22.

Chapter 7

Island life: interpreting the social organisation of space on early medieval crannogs

Introduction

Having arrived on a crannog in the early Middle Ages, a person would have then gone in the entrance and seen for the first time, what was going on within. After walking into the interior of the island, a man or woman could have seen the various physical features that its inhabitants used; their houses and dwellings, fences, pathways, fireplaces and spreads of charcoal, ash and wood, middens of bone, dung and rotting materials. These houses, pathways and fireplaces all helped to define and structure human activity within the site. They both constrained and enabled what people could and couldn't do there. But they were also themselves created by that same human activity, a few days of metalworking would leave behind all kinds of debris (e.g. slags, reddened clay, broken crucibles), while a few hours of feasting and carousing would leave a small mound of bones and waste. All of these traces testified to the past use of the site, its history, as well as the future needs and intentions of the people living there.

Obviously, a person walking into the crannog in the early Middle Ages brought with him or her an understanding and awareness of what was going on that it is utterly impossible for us to reconstruct today. In interpreting the archaeological traces of those activities, we simply do not have the inherited knowledge that would enable us to fully 'read' the history of the site. However, it is possible to use archaeology and history to propose some interpretations of how space was organised within early medieval crannogs. It is also possible to suggest what the *social affects* such structuring of space may have had.

Why is this important? In general, it is accepted that past settlements and dwelling places were often key places for the various social, economic, ceremonial and informal political activities that helped to create and reproduce society. For example, Johnson has recently suggested that late medieval castles be regarded as a type of theatre of performance, where various social encounters were managed and controlled by its walls, gateways and hallways, thereby fulfilling the various social and ideological intentions of late medieval society. Similarly, in early medieval Ireland, enclosures were often organised in certain ways so that their boundaries, entrances and internal structures

perpetuated and sustained particular conceptions of society. It is clear, for example, that early medieval houses were used as an expression of identity, status, prestige and cultural values. In attempting to understand how these places worked then, we are essentially trying to understand how that society thought about itself and how it attempted to achieve this on day-to-day basis.

Reconstructing the social organisation of space within early medieval crannogs

In this section, I will attempt to explore the ordering of space within early medieval crannogs. There are admittedly some serious obstacles to this. Despite over a hundred years of research, there are very few crannog sites that have been excavated to a high scientific standard or have produced detailed site plans, cross-sections or descriptions of individual features. Having said that, I suggest that it is possible to glean useful information from a careful perusal of 10 published and unpublished site excavation reports, some of which have also been the subject of substantive stratigraphical and structural re-interpretations. It is also worth noting that some of the sites had several phases of activity, which significantly increases the number of occupation levels that can actually be assessed (e.g. Moynagh Lough is not a 'single' crannog, but a site that was re-occupied on at least six phases, each providing different evidence of occupation activity). Similar patterns can be seen on most sites.

The crannogs assessed for the purposes of this study were Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, Sroove, Co. Sligo, Lough More (Bofeenaun), Co. Mayo, Lough Faughan, Co. Down, Clea lakes, Co. Down, Craigywarren, Co. Antrim, Ballinderry no. 1, Co. Westmeath, Ballinderry no. 2, Co. Offaly, Lagore, Co. Meath, Rathtinaun, Co. Sligo (unpublished site report and archive) and Newtownlow, Co. Westmeath (unpublished report). For more detailed information on each site the reader may examine the site descriptions in Appendix 3 (see below), or turn to the original site reports as footnoted. It is useful that even this small sample of Irish early medieval crannogs probably includes royal sites (e.g. Lagore), high status or noble dwellings (probably Moynagh Lough, Rathtinaun, Ballinderry No. 2), 'middle class' dwellings of strong farmers and craftsmen (e.g. Lough Faughan, Craigywarren), low status sites of the merely ordinary or even poor (e.g. Sroove phase 3).

This analysis will focus on establishing what architectural/structural features, fixture and fittings could be recognised as being present on a site, as well as their location, form,

composition and appearance. The 'elements' to be assessed included palisades, quays, site entrances, pathways, timber and wattle screens, houses and other structures, hearths, fireplaces, 'floors' (either within or outside houses), pits, furnaces and burnt spreads, cess-pits, middens, dumps of material, as well as the locations of individual finds such as querns, implements, items of personal adornment, along with indicators of economic and craft activity. This will be interpreted in terms of social relationships, concepts of status and gender, and ideas about the past.

One of the striking things to emerge from this analysis is that there is actually a much wider range of information available than might have been thought. For example, although there would previously have been a general view amongst Irish archaeologists that very few crannogs have produced evidence for houses, I suggest that there are 14 definite or possible houses that can at least be discussed. Some crannogs have good archaeological evidence for a sequence of houses (e.g. on Moynagh Lough phases Y, X, W, and Sroove phases 2, 3), while others clearly do not (e.g. Lough More has no evidence at all of any house structure). Another striking feature is the significant diversity in terms of site size and activity and the range of artefact assemblages found on them. There may also be significant differences across time, even within the lifecycles of each site. It might be suggested that some began as relatively modest lake dwellings, and become slowly transformed into politically significant settlements in their latter stages. On other sites, they actually change over from dwelling to entirely industrial functions (Lough More was an iron-working site, Moynagh Lough phase X was largely devoted to copper-alloy metalworking, while between phase 3 and phase 4 on Sroove, that site shifted from being a dwelling to an iron-working mound). This confirms perhaps that there is no such thing as a 'typical Irish crannog'. Each site was a product of particular local historical events and the changing needs and perceptions of local communities. On the other hand, there is also a sense of a general underlying structure, reflecting the perception of island life amongst early medieval communities.

Entering the island: entrances and pathways

Introduction

Having arrived at the crannog, a person had to cross the boundary, to move through the palisade, to enter into the site. This was a crucial moment, for it placed a person within, rather than outside, the dwelling enclosure, so that site entrances should be regarded as socially and symbolically important. On early medieval settlement sites, the gate was the ultimate means of orienting the site's lifeways, controlling access to the outer and inner worlds, and were often guarded and maintained as other parts of an enclosing feature

slumped or collapsed. In general, entrances on early medieval ringforts typically face towards the east or southeast, being usually simple gaps in banks and ditches. On some sites, entrances can be more complex, with cobbled pathways, substantial wooden gates, towers, and so on.¹ For example, at the early medieval ringfort at Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim, there was a quite complex entrance, with a causeway leading up to a narrow entrance, and side walls either side of the ramp forcing the visitor further in to the site. In this case, the entrance served to control and manipulate the visitor right up the entrance door of the main roundhouse on the site.² Unfortunately, there are actually few early medieval crannogs sites where it is possible to examine the character of their entrances, largely because so few sites have been totally excavated and renewal and rebuilding of palisades may often have altered them on many.

Entrances, gates and pathways

However, it is apparent that closely defined and even defended entrances with pathways leading in to the settlement are known, particularly at Moynagh Lough, at Ballinderry No. 1 (Fig. 7.1) and perhaps at Ballinderry No. 2 and Sroove. There are too few entrances known to assess whether they face particular directions as even the few examples that have entrances face variously towards the eastern side, the northeast and the north. It is more important to assess what particular entrances were achieving on particular lakes, and whether they were facing the land or water.

There are some entrances that appear to be quite defensive in character. An interesting entrance feature was identified at crannog no. 2, Cuilmore Lough, Co. Mayo, where a natural promontory or low islet in a lake was fortified by erecting a double wooden palisade across the neck of the promontory. It has been suggested that a possible gate or tower may have been situated in the middle of the palisade and the inner, enclosed area had a possible circular structure within it.³ On smaller sites, such as the Phase 2 occupation at Sroove, Co. Sligo, the entrance was more difficult to trace, perhaps being merely marked by a line of stones across the causeway that led into the site from the land.⁴

¹ Mytum, *Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp 123-4.

² C.J. Lynn, 'Deer Park Farms', pp 193-8; C.J. Lynn, 'Early medieval houses', pp 126-31.

³ Etienne Rynne and Gearóid Mac Eoin, 'The Craggaunowen crannóg: gangway and gatetower' in *N.M.A.J.*, 20 (1978), pp 47-56; This site strongly influenced the construction of the crannog in the Folk Park at Craggaunowen, Co. Clare, with its controversial tower over the gate, but it is still an image of a crannog that continues to shape the popular image of Irish crannogs.

⁴ Fredengren *Crannogs*, pp 28-32.

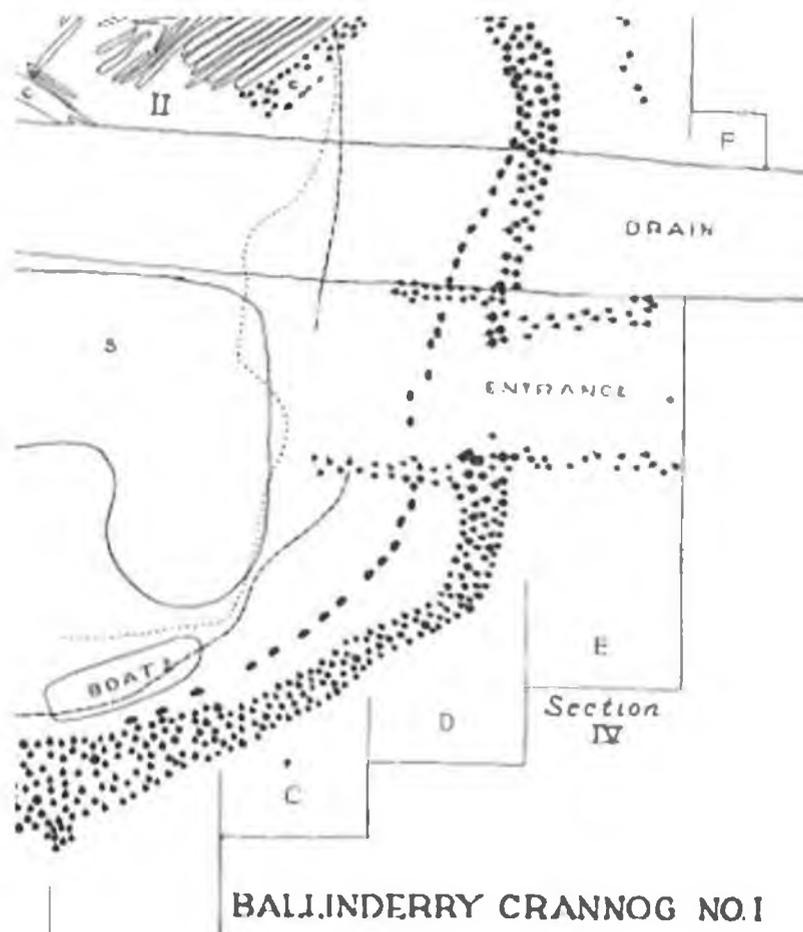


Fig. 7.1. The entrance gap and causeway into the Phase 3 (early to mid-eleventh century AD) 'primary crannog' at Ballinderry No. 1, where a carefully constructed passageway 'encourages' people to move directly towards the middle of the enclosure. This 'entrance' was closed in the Phase 4 reconditioned crannog, when it is blocked by an oak plank palisade and the quay on the opposite side becomes the main entrance. (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', Pl. IV).

The entrance on the ninth-century crannog at Ballinderry No. 2, Co. Offaly was also quite simple, despite the obvious wealth and power of its inhabitants. It appears to have been defined by two posts and a few smaller ones, driven down to a depth of 1.5m. This was much deeper than any other posts in the palisade suggesting that this was the entrance, facing ENE towards the land. A brushwood pathway to the southeast probably led into the site.⁵

There was good, if somewhat puzzling, evidence for an entrance on the early eighth-century Phase X levels at Moynagh Lough (the phase with extensive metalworking areas).

⁵ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog No. 2', p. 31.

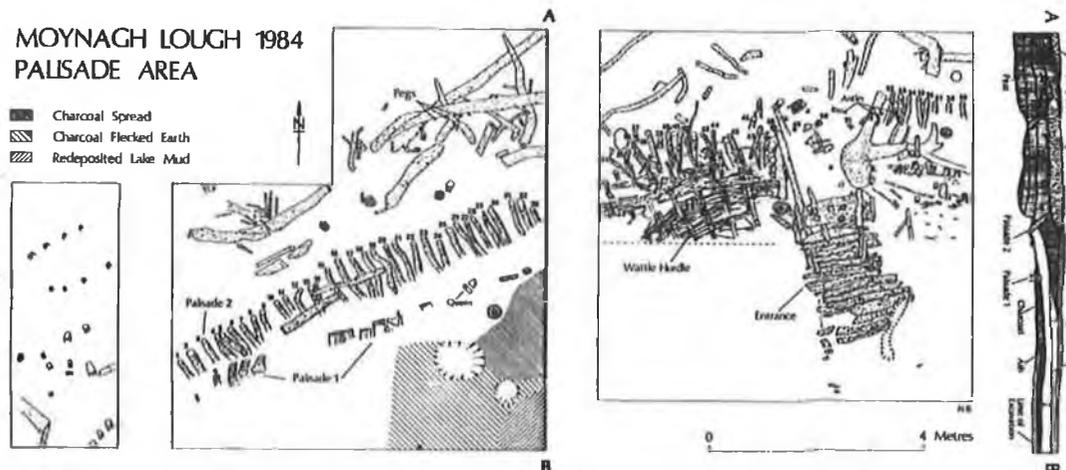


Fig. 7.2 The palisade and entrance gap at the early eighth-century Phase X levels at Moynagh Lough crannog. Co. Meath. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, pp 29-30.)

The Moynagh Lough entrance was situated on the north side of the crannog, and it faced out into the waters of the lake, looking across it to a possible early medieval raised ringfort at Nobber, on the far side. It was defined by a simple gap in the palisade, inside of which a timber pathway ran into the internal dwelling area. The entrance gap was only about 1 metre wide and may have been defined by a cluster of posts. It is interesting that the palisade (2) from the subsequent phase of occupation appeared to cut across it, and in a sense 'closed' it (Fig. 7.2).⁶

There is certainly good evidence for a quite complex entrance at Ballinderry No. 1, Co. Westmeath and intriguingly, there is also evidence here for the subsequent 'closing' of the entrance. In the Phase 3 'primary crannog' (dated to the early to mid-eleventh century AD), there was a defended entrance on the southeast side of the palisade, 2m in width. It was quite elaborate, flanked by especially heavy oak piles, with an 'outer' passageway defined by two rows of posts that guided people towards a gap in the palisade, with a brushwood spread as a pathway. Just inside the gap, a second 'inner' passageway of posts was added at a later stage and further guided people into the site. There was probably also a gate hanging on the posts defining the gap as one squared, heavy oak post had a bar-hole cut into its side. At Ballinderry no. 1 then, a person approaching the site was manipulated and guided into the site by these wooden passageways, gaps and gates. The site also had a quay on the opposite side of the islet, which led into a broad

⁶ Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough, 1984*, p. 83, Fig. 2; Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, pp 29-30.

gap across the palisade at its north side. In Phase 4 (mid to late eleventh century AD), the crannog was reconditioned. The old entrance was abandoned and blocked off by a heavy oak plank palisade. Thereafter, the quay and its entrance appeared to be the main way into the site.⁷

Living on an island: observing work and daily life on early medieval crannogs

Introduction

In early medieval Ireland, people would have spent most of their time out of doors, engaged in various practical or public activities. How people moved and worked around a site like a ringfort or crannog would have been bound up with various social and cultural ideas of normal behaviour. In early Irish law, there is a striking sense that movement around a dwelling was highly orchestrated and controlled by the owner. Even to look into a man's house unbidden entailed a fine of one cow and to cross a man's courtyard without permission or to open the door of his house renders the culprit liable to pay 5 *séts*.⁸

This movement would have been enabled and controlled by various outdoor fixtures or settings, such as pathways, fences, fireplaces, middens, pits and working areas paved in brushwood or stone. A person's perception and movement around that space would also have worked with other items, such as agricultural equipment, tools and various objects lying around on the ground. It is a striking feature of many ringforts (e.g. Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim, Leacanabuile, Co. Kerry and Ballypalady 2, Co. Antrim⁹), that upon entering the site, a person was often persuaded by laid pathways to move directly and immediately to the house doorway. On crannogs, it is occasionally possible to observe such patterns of 'encouraged' daily movement. At Moynagh Lough, a wooden pathway leads from the entrance into the enclosure, past a metalworking area and on in to the central space of the site, which is overlooked by the house off to the right. At Sroove, on entering, one had to walk to the right inside the palisade, before turning to the left to the doorway of the house. A person in the early Middle Ages, having the inherited, taken-for-granted understanding of social life (i.e. *habitus* as proposed by Bourdieu),

⁷ Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', pp 120-1, Fig. 2, Plates XIII, XIV, XV.

⁸ Kelly, *Early Irish law*, p. 110.

⁹ Lynn, 'Deer Park Farms', pp 193-8; S.P. O' Riordáin and J.B. Foy, 'The excavation of Leacanabuile stone fort, near Caherciveen, Co. Kerry' in *Cork Hist. Soc. Jn.*, 46, (1941), pp 85-91; Dudley Waterman, 'A group of raths at Ballypalady, Co. Antrim' in *U.J.A.* 35 (1972), pp 29-36.

would have learned from these patterns and objects, various aspects of how social status, kinship and gender relationships were ordered within the organisation of the enclosure.

Understanding social hierarchy and status by observing labour on crannogs

Moving around a crannog would also have allowed a person to see various things that reflected the daily life and work of the site's inhabitants. In particular, he or she could have seen abundant evidence for various types of labour and crafts, some definitely indicative of social status. It is true that most crannogs (like contemporary ringforts and other dwellings) have produced a wide range of evidence for various crafts, such as bone working, wood working, textile production, occasional glass working and particularly metal working (both iron working and non-ferrous metal working).¹⁰ It is undoubtedly also true that a wide range of these craft skills were probably available to everybody in the community, in particular, wood working, leather working and some types of bone working. These crafts would have been carried out in the home or around the farmstead, as part of the self-sufficient lifestyle of most families and households.

However, other crafts, such as copper-alloy working, glass production and intricate artefact production were probably specialist crafts. It is likely that such specialist and skilled craftsmen and women were occasionally resident on crannogs. As skilled itinerants, they may have moved around the *túath*, working for patrons, who would have supplied them with raw materials, food and protection in return for prestige goods.¹¹ At Moynagh Lough, it is likely that copper-alloy production was closely linked to the social status of the site's owners, with guests and visitors understanding the wealth and status of this social group from the abundance of metalworking debris lying around the site (see below). It should be remembered that craft production in early medieval Ireland would always have been understood by people in social terms – being bound up with ideas about social rank, status and gender. Early Irish laws and hagiographies indicate that wrights, copper-workers and smiths were all high-status individuals themselves, occasionally having a similar honour-price to that of lower grade of nobility. It is also clear that manual labour was to be avoided by people above a certain social rank (so that being discovered cutting wood was a mark of shame for a lord, for example). Similarly, comb-

¹⁰ O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, pp 141-5; Edwards, *The archaeology of early medieval Ireland*, pp 68-98; Mytum, *Origins of early Christian Ireland*, pp 210-52.

¹¹ Bradley, 'Moynagh Lough: An insular workshop', Fig. 8.4; Susan Youngs (ed), *'The work of angels': Masterpieces of Celtic metalwork, 6th-9th centuries AD* (London, 1989), pp 178-8; Michael Ryan, 'Fine metalworking and early Irish monasteries: the archaeological evidence' in John Bradley, *Settlement and society in medieval Ireland* (Kilkenny, 1988), pp 33-48, at pp 38-9.

makers were portrayed as being of low social status by the jurists who compiled the laws, where they scoffed that comb makers were to be associated with dogs and dunghills.¹²

Understanding gender by observing labour on crannogs

If craft production was to be understood in terms of social status, it was also to be organised on the basis of gender relations.¹³ Both the early Irish historical sources and anthropological studies indicate that textile production, involving the spinning of yarn, its dyeing, weaving, and the actual manufacture of clothing were all tasks carried out by women.¹⁴ In an ordinary household, such tasks were probably carried out by mothers and daughters, on lordly sites, it was more likely to have been done by slave-women (although the early Irish sources claim that elaborate embroidery was carried out by noble women). If weaving was primarily a female task, then it is possible that the procurement and preparation of weaving equipment (spindle whorls, distaffs, weaving tablets, needles and looms) was also a woman's task. The preparation of food, such as the grinding of grain in rotary querns and the preparation of milk, cheeses, whey, curds, and so on tend to be broadly portrayed as women's work in the literature.¹⁵

Other crafts, in particular metal working, stone working, house-building and carpentry are portrayed as broadly men's activities. Blacksmiths, personages of extraordinary symbolic resonance, for example, are virtually always portrayed as men in the saint's lives and narrative literature. On the other hand, it is also true that there were many domestic tasks, such as cattle herding, tending of pigs, sheep and goats, managing of chickens, that were carried out by both men and women, working in co-operation together. Similarly, children were probably involved in a whole range of tasks around the household.¹⁶

Wood working

Some specialist crafts required particular equipment and learned skills. The production of stave-built buckets and the carving of lathe-turned bowls were probably done by those trained at the craft. In particular, those 'wet-coopered' buckets required to contain liquids (water, milk, beer) would have had to have been cleft from oak planks and carefully carved to produce a tight fit. So specialist woodworkers may occasionally have been present on some sites. There is abundant evidence from the waterlogged deposits of

¹² Kelly, *Early Irish law*, p. 63.

¹³ Bitel, *Land of women*, pp 111-37.

¹⁴ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 448-51.

¹⁵ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 450; Bitel, *Land of women*, pp 123-5.

crannogs for the on-site manufacturing, use and discard of such wooden artefacts, such as lathe-turned bowls, carved tubs, stave-built buckets.¹⁷ Bucket stave blanks found at Moynagh Lough suggested that some element of coopering was being carried out on the site.¹⁸ A few crannogs (e.g. Lagore and Moynagh Lough) have also produced some evidence for lathe-turning wasters (the wooden 'cores' left after the bowls are complete) suggesting that they were manufactured on-site using pole-lathes.¹⁹

Bone, antler and leather working

Bone working and antler working was also apparently commonly practiced on early medieval crannogs, with raw materials, semi-worked pieces and complete plain and decorated pins, toilet implements, combs and other objects are relatively common finds on both high-status and low-status sites. The large bone assemblages in crannog middens (of pig bone in particular, as pins were commonly carved from pig fibulae) probably served as a ready supply of raw material for pins, and recent studies are beginning to reveal the various stages of production and discard involved.²⁰ It might even be suggested that the production of bone pins to be worn in the hair or clothing was closely linked to the 'quality' of a site's food waste, both being a means of social display.

There is also good evidence for textile production on crannogs, a task typically done by women, involving the processing of wool and hair using distaffs, spindles or simple looms (loom weights are occasional finds), while tablet weaving implements and textile fragments have been found at sites like Lagore. Leather working may have been practiced on some sites as discarded shoes, worked scraps of leather and a wooden shoe-last were found at Lagore, while iron leather-scoring tools are known from Lagore and Ballinderry No. 1.

Iron working and non-ferrous metalworking

The archaeological evidence for iron slag from many early medieval settlement sites, including crannogs, seems to indicate that small-scale iron-working must have been relatively common and that an individual farmer may have had sufficient knowledge of iron-working to repair his own equipment or make simple tools. On the other hand,

¹⁶ Kelly, *Early Irish farming*, pp 451-2.

¹⁷ Caroline Earwood, *Domestic wooden artefacts in Britain and Ireland from Neolithic to Viking times* (Exeter, 1993).

¹⁸ Bradley, 'A separate-bladed shovel from Moynagh Lough, County Meath', pp 117-22.

¹⁹ Caroline Earwood, 'Turned wooden vessels of the early medieval period from Ireland and western Scotland' in *U.J.A.*, 54-55 (1991-1992), pp 154-159.

²⁰ Jim Boyle, pers. comm.

there is clear evidence from the archaeological record, and in the early Irish literature, for particular specialist metal working. The processing of iron ore, and the forging of complex objects (e.g. swords, spearheads, axes) would have been carried out by blacksmiths. Similarly, other specialist crafts could have included non-ferrous metal working (including the working of copper alloys, silver, tin, gold and glass-working), as well as sophisticated coopering and lathe-turning.

It is occasionally possible to trace the social and spatial organisation of such crafts and industry within the enclosed spaces of crannogs. This is particularly the case of metalworking, where the use of furnaces, pits, fires and dumps of material often leave significant archaeological traces. It has to be admitted that places where other activities, such as bone working, are more difficult to pin down, as both raw materials were thrown about and objects carried off for use. However, in metalworking there are various actual features that can be used to discuss this topic. Particularly interesting are those fixtures or fittings that had to be constructed, used and maintained across time (i.e. pits and furnaces for heating metals, cobbled surfaces for pouring molten metal into moulds and then laying to cool, pits for waste, etc). Such features can be firstly understood in terms of how people used a particular feature in the *past*. They also allow some comment on how often such activities might have taken place there. They can also be used to trace people's intentions to use them again in the *future*. This is particularly true of iron working and copper-alloy working where individual furnaces were filled with clean sand, implying that a metalworker had the intention to return to a site and to re-use it. Finally, they also signal the moment of abandonment, when metalworking areas simply stopped being used, occasionally in mid-use.

Early medieval metalworking and Moynagh Lough crannog

One of the most significant metalworking industries to occur on some early medieval crannogs (and of course on many other sites) was non-ferrous metalworking, particularly of copper alloys.²¹ There is archaeological evidence from several crannogs for the waste from the primary production of copper ores, for the purifying of copper in baked clay crucibles, which were also used for adding tin to make the bronze. There is also the evidence for on-site casting of objects, using two-piece clay moulds, within which copper alloy rings, pins and decorated brooches were produced. Crucibles and moulds have been found at Lagore, Ballinderry No. 2, Moynagh Lough, Craigyarwarren and Lough Faughan crannogs.

²¹ Mytum, *Origins of early Christian Ireland*, pp 213-9; Edwards, *The archaeology of early*

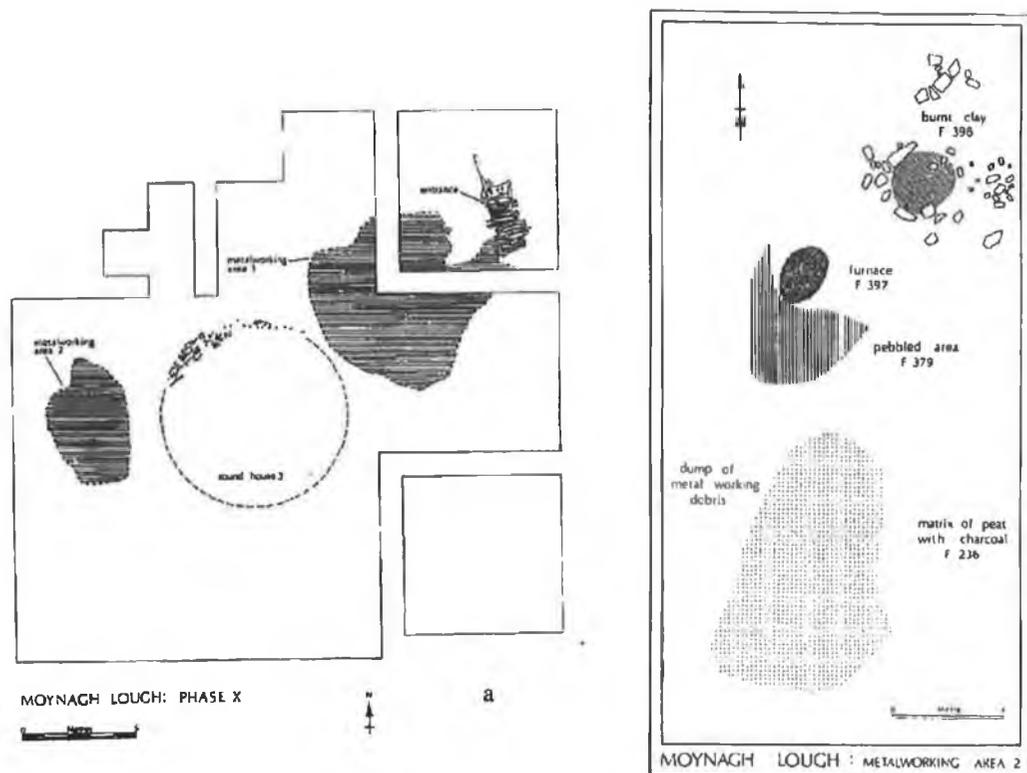


Fig. 7.3 Plan of early medieval Phase X (c. AD 720-748) at Moynagh Lough, outlining metalworking areas 1 and 2. The pits and furnaces were occasionally filled with clean sand, probably so that they could be returned to and re-used on the next visit to the island by the smith. (source: J. Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 121(1991), pp 5-26, Fig. 8).

Another early medieval crannog, Moylurg crannog, Co. Antrim has also produced evidence for copper alloy working, as the site produced a lead model of a decorated ring for a brooch and a copper ingot with its ingot mould. The site also produced a decorated bronze sieve of eighth to ninth century AD date, although this was probably made on a monastic site.²² However, one of the interesting things about this is the question of scale of activity and the presence of craftsmen on such sites. For example, in reality, the single crucible found at Craigywarren hardly argues for an extensive 'industry', it could easily have been left on the site by a passing, itinerant smith. On the other hand, there is clear evidence that on-site copper alloy production was ongoing and regular on at least two sites, Lagore and Moynagh Lough.²³

medieval Ireland, pp 90-1; O'Sullivan, *The archaeology of lake settlement*, p. 141

²² Buick, 'The crannog of Moylurg', pp. 27-43; Buick, 'The crannog of Moylurg', pp. 316-331.

²³ Michelle Comber, 'Lagore crannog and non-ferrous metalworking in early historic Ireland' in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 8 (1997), pp 101-14.

At Moynagh Lough, phase X (dated to the early eighth century), there was evidence for several episodes of copper production, including both melting and casting.²⁴ This occurred episodically, in places that may have been deliberately located towards the edge of the site. Two metalworking areas were found towards the northern side of the crannog, both of them close to the palisades (Fig. 7.3). Metalworking area 1 (possibly dated to *c.*AD 720) appears to have been between a house and the entrance to the site, just beside its timber pathway. It was a spread of charcoal, earth and ash and the presence of pieces of baked clay, crucible sherds, mould fragments, an iron stake used for sheet metal working and motif pieces, probably indicates the manufacture of objects at that place.

Metalworking area 2 was also located in an outdoor location, at the back of the roundhouse, between it and a possible jetty area at the palisade. In metalworking area 2, several features were used, including a furnace, a stone-edged area of burnt clay, a compacted spread of pebbles and a dump of metalwork debris. These were permanent fixtures, used for on-site manufacturing and production. Interestingly, the furnace, constructed in a prepared scoop in the peat, had been filled with clean sand and tiny pebbles. This, and the nearby presence of charcoal spreads, suggested that it was used concurrently (on at least eight occasions) and may perhaps have been actually left with an intention to come back to it again. Near the furnace was a possible wind-break and a pebbled area upon which people could have stood and worked. In a dump of metalworking debris (e.g. slag, amber chips, worked horn and antler, as well as animal bones, seeds and coprolites) just to the south of the furnace, most of the residues from this work were found. They included 5 clay-nozzle fragments, 67 crucible fragments, 3 heating-tray fragments and over 600 mould fragments. It was possible to discern the different types of bronze brooches, pins, mounts and studs that were being produced from the decoration and indentations in these mould fragments (Fig. 7.4).²⁵

At Moynagh Lough, ingots were brought onto the site (one being found inside a roundhouse), placed in crucibles and put into the furnace. When the metal had melted, the crucible were removed, the dross and impurities removed, and the molten metal poured into the moulds. These were then allowed to cool (probably on the cobbled area beside the furnace), before they were broken to take out the cast object.

²⁴ Bradley, 'Moynagh Lough: An insular workshop', pp 178-84; Bradley 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough (1991), pp 5-26; Ryan, 'Fine metalworking and early Irish monasteries', pp 38-9.

²⁵ Bradley, 'Moynagh Lough: An insular workshop', pp 178-84.

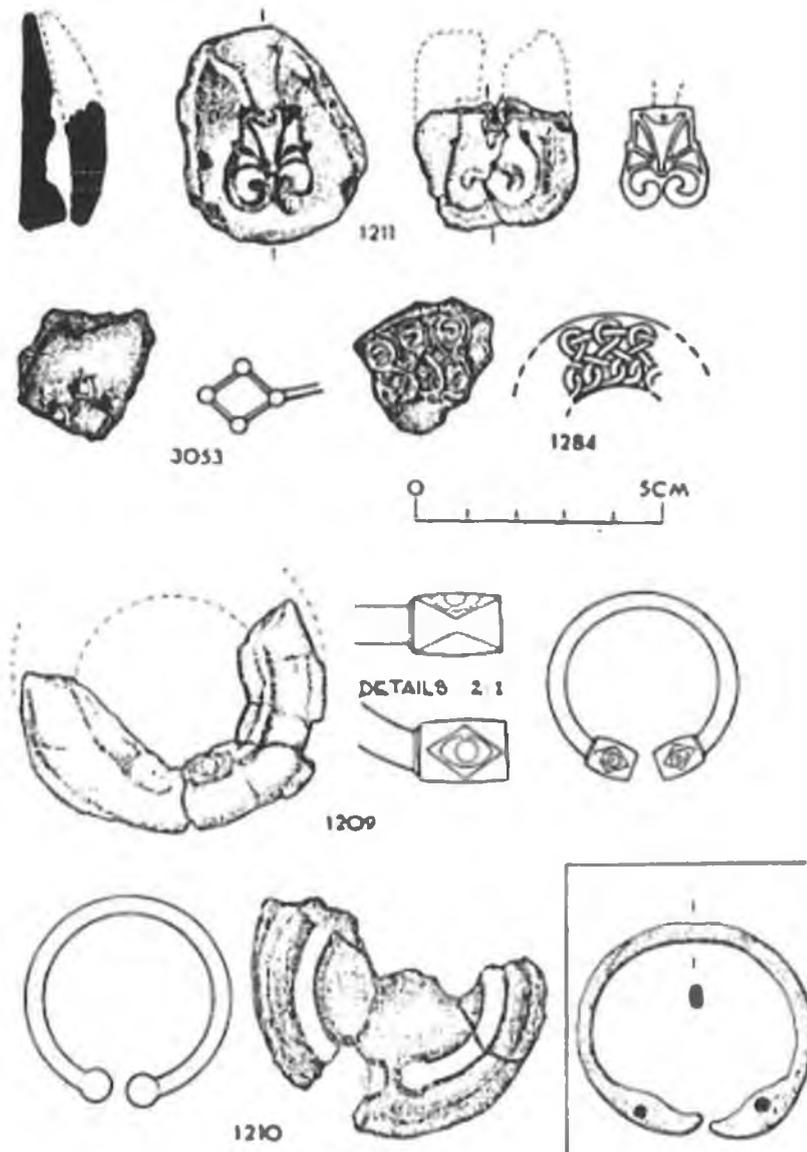


Fig. 7.4 Clay mould fragments used for casting copper-alloy rings and brooches from the early medieval Phase X levels at Moynagh Lough, along with a pennanular brooch with bird's head terminals from Phase W (source: J. Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' in *R.S.A.I. Jn.*, 121(1991), pp 5-26, Fig. 8).

This was then worked with whetstones, filed and soldered and enamel and amber was added. The object was then taken away.

It is difficult to escape the conclusion while there was a range of metalworking evidence across all levels at Moynagh Lough, that the manufacture of objects was not a regular, but a periodic event. It is tempting to also suggest that such events occurred at the same time as other significant moments on the site (i.e. local political assemblies, feasts, other social occasions) and that all were used to project ideas of power and status around the

community. Indeed, newly made and finished objects may well have been presented as gifts and tribute during the same occasions, perhaps even being cracked open from their moulds and finished in front of a client.

Early medieval iron working islands: Bofeenaun and Sroove crannogs

Iron working was also practiced on many sites, with the evidence for furnaces, iron bloom and other waste an occasional find. However, however significant iron working was *within* some sites, it appears that some crannogs were *entirely* devoted to iron working. At Sroove Phase 4, the site was turned into an open-air iron working platform by laying down a rocky paving of stone, with some quantities of slag and a possible furnace at one side of the island. There was also a lot of fragmentary animal bone spread across the site (bone is often used in the iron working process). There was no evidence for any structure on the site, this was simply an uninhabited rocky islet devoted to iron working. At Lough More, the crannog (dated to c.AD 804) also had a single, rocky layer of flagstones spread across its peaty surface. Significantly again, there was no evidence for any internal house structures or domestic equipment and the few meagre scraps of cattle and pig bone hardly suggested long-term occupation.²⁶

Although this region of south Mayo has extensive evidence for early medieval settlement (with numerous ringforts found to the north-west), the crannog itself was located in a bleak, sparsely populated, isolated mountain valley. What the crannog did produce was very large quantities of iron working debris, including slag from the iron working process. This included unique evidence for *all* the stages of iron working, including the processing of iron ore in a furnace (rarely if ever found on early medieval sites), the smithing of the iron bloom and the secondary forging of iron objects. Other finds on the site also reflect these exclusively industrial activities, such as the stone mortars probably used for pounding and grinding the freshly quarried iron ore (Fig. 7.5; Fig. 7.6).

Why were islands on a lake chosen for this activity? A functional explanation would propose that iron working was being carried out near to water, to enable the washing of the ores and to remove a dangerous, sparking fire from a domestic household (in reality, experimental archaeology has shown that iron working can be carried out inside houses without danger). But this still does not explain why an *island* was required (i.e. a site on the lakeshore would have sufficed).

²⁶ Keane 'Lough More', pp 167-182.



Fig. 7.5 View of early medieval iron-working crannog at Bofeenaun (Lough More) crannog, Co. Mayo. The islet was situated in an isolated mountain valley location and was seemingly devoted (at least in its early ninth-century occupation) to the processing of iron ore, the smithing of bloom and the forging of iron objects. An island location may have enabled the smith to preserve the arcane secrets of his trade (Photo: Christy Lawless, 1991).

The answer may lie both in beliefs about islands and the social and symbolic role of the blacksmith in early medieval Ireland. Although people may have been able to forge simple tools or repaired equipment, the intricate and difficult process of transforming iron ore to bloom and the final forging of a finished implement or weapon seems to have been the task only of specialist blacksmiths. These blacksmiths were highly esteemed and had a semi-mythical status in early medieval Ireland.²⁷ The blacksmith was also occasionally feared, as he was believed to have spell-casting powers, probably because he was involved in the dangerous transformation of raw iron to such culturally crucially important tools as plough-irons, sickles and swords. In early Irish law, the blacksmith's tools, his cooking pit and his anvil were associated backwards in time with the pagan goddess of war, (the Morrigan) and the pagan Celtic 'good god' (the 'Dagda'), signifying that the smith was a supernatural, powerful figure.²⁸

²⁷ B.G. Scott, *Early Irish ironworking* (Belfast, 1990); Kelly, *Early Irish law*, p. 62.

²⁸ B.G. Scott, 'An early Irish law tract on the blacksmith's forge', in *Jn. Ir. Archaeol.*, 1 (1983), pp 59-62; Kelly, *Early Irish law*, p. 63; Mytum, *Origins of Early Christian Ireland*, pp 229-35.

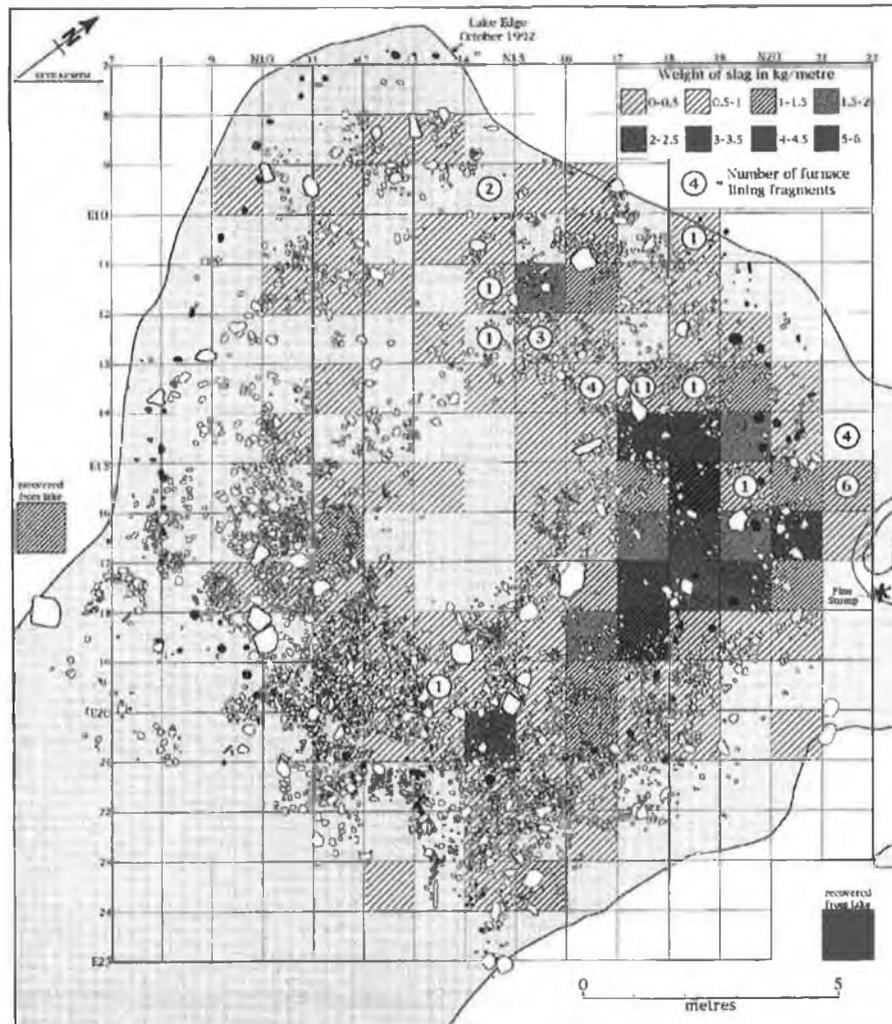


Figure 15. Plan of Crannóg showing distributions of slag and furnace fragments.

Fig. 7.6 Plan of early medieval iron-working crannóg at Bofeenaun, Co. Mayo. The distribution of slag, stone mortars and other waste indicates that the main industrial activities took place against the palisade, to the right as one entered the site. This is similar to the copper-alloy working activities on Moynagh Lough (to the right, inside the entrance and beside the palisade), while at Lagore, metalworking activity was also concentrated at the edge of the site. (Source: M. Keane, 'The crannóg' in *Irish Archaeological Wetland Unit Transactions*, 4 (1995), pp 167-82, Fig. 15).

It is possible that both Bofeenaun and Sroove Phase 4 were the island, and indeed deliberately insular, forges of early medieval blacksmiths and their 'apprentices', chosen so as to preserve secret the arcane knowledge of the blacksmith's craft. Certainly, the only other known early medieval blacksmith's forge in Ireland, a re-used roundhouse at Ballyvourney, Co. Cork, was also in an isolated location.²⁹ This is something that is

²⁹ M.J. O'Kelly, 'St Gobnet's house, Ballyvourney, Co. Cork' in *Cork Hist. Soc. Jn.*, 57 (1952), pp 18-40.

commonly found in ethnographic studies, where the work of the blacksmith is often seen in magical and symbolic terms (often being a metaphor for human sexuality and reproduction), and is conducted outside the gaze of other individuals or groups that are not affiliated with the iron-working social group. Various taboos and rituals about supernatural phenomena are constructed to exclude outsiders and both a social and spatial distance is maintained from the rest of the community. These symbolic, ritual and magical aspects of a complex technology have various functions. They relieve the stress of a complex process, they control and channel the handing down of knowledge and they legitimate the smith's status.³⁰

It has already been shown that islands were occasionally seen in the early medieval imagination as places where both significant transformations could take place and where powerful figures resided. There is an interesting incident in the eighth-century *Navigatio Sancti Brendani abbatis* ('Voyage of St Brendan the abbot'), the tale that describes the travels of the sixth-century Brendan and some of his monks on a seven-year journey on the wide ocean, where they meet with marvellous islands, sea creatures and other wonders. One day, the monks encounter the 'island of smiths', where some otherworldly blacksmiths were working, with the billowing smoke and noxious smells all conveying the danger of the place. Indeed, the monks barely escape with their lives, as the smiths cast steaming lumps of slag after them as they fled. Although it is probably metaphorical of hell (and perhaps descriptive of a volcanic eruption) and should not to be taken as a literal description, the island is uncannily similar to what an outsider could have seen at Lough More and Sroove, so is worth quoting in full.

After eight days they caught sight of an island not far away, very rough, rocky and full of slag, without trees or grass, full of smiths' forges. The venerable father said to his brothers:

'I am troubled about this island. I do not want to go on it or even come near it. But the wind is bringing us directly there'.

As they were sailing for a moment beside it, a stone's throw away, they heard the sound of bellows blowing, as if it were thunder, and the blows of hammers on irons and anvils. When he heard this the venerable father armed himself, making the sign of the Lord in all four directions, saying:

'Lord, Jesus Christ, deliver us from the island.'

When the man of God had finished speaking, one of the inhabitants of the island was seen to come out of doors apparently to do something or other. He was very shaggy and full at once of fire and darkness. When he saw the servants of Christ pass near the island, he went back into his forge. The man of God blessed himself again and said to his brothers:

'My sons, raise the sail higher still and row as fast as you can and let us flee from this island.'

³⁰ Nicholas David and Carol Kramer, *Ethnoarchaeology in action* (Cambridge 2001), pp 328-55, at pp 346-7.

Even before he had finished speaking, the same savage came to the shore near where they were carrying a tongs in his hands that held a lump of burning slag of immense size and heat. He immediately threw the lump on top of the servants of Christ, but it did no hurt to them. It passed more than two hundred yards above them. Then the sea, where it fell, began to boil, as if a volcano were erupting there. The smoke rose from the sea as from a fiery furnace.

But when the man of God had got about a mile away from the spot where the lump fell, all the islanders came to the shore, each of them carrying a lump of his own. Some of them began to throw the lumps after the servant of Christ into the sea, the one throwing his lump over the other, all the while going back to the forges and setting the lumps on fire. It looked as if the whole island was ablaze, like one big furnace, and the sea boiled, just as a cooking pot full of meat boils when it is well plied with fire. All day long they could hear a great howling from the island. Even when they could no longer see it, the howling of the denizens still reached their ears, and the stench of the fire assailed their nostrils. The holy father comforted his monks, saying: 'Soldiers of Christ, be strengthened in faith unfeigned and in spiritual weapons, for we are in the confines of Hell. So, be on the watch and be brave.'³¹

Typically, the smith is seen as someone who works under the patronage of his lord. More rarely has it been considered how such individuals themselves acted to promote their own social and economic interests. It might be suggested that both Lough More and Sroove crannogs indicate that the blacksmith on his island was both excluding the rest of the community, at the same time as he was slightly feared and misunderstood by them. Although the community may have participated in the quarrying of ores, and certainly in the use of the products, this island stage was literally off-limits. An outside observer standing on the lake-shore at either Lough More or Sroove crannog would witness only billowing smoke, smell noxious fumes and hear the din of the smiths hammer, but would see little of the intricacies and skills of the iron working process. In a sense, crannogs were being used as places for the negotiation of knowledge and power, deliberately isolated places intended to maintain a social distance and to preserve the secrets of a specialist craft.

Feasting space: food, dirt and the social role of middens on early medieval crannogs

Introduction

Another thing that a modern person would observe on a putative visit to an early medieval crannog would be the dirt, smell and general noisome atmosphere. On the floors of houses and scattered around the site would be an abundant mess of food scraps, rotting vegetation and broken objects. On most early medieval crannogs, there is abundant evidence for animal bone, human and animal dung, as well as an array of

³¹ Selmer (ed.), *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis*; the translation used here is taken from O'Meara *The voyage of Saint Brendan*, pp. 52-4.

industrial and domestic waste and debris scattered in a general way across the site. It will be shown below that house floors typically produce scatters of tiny and broken animal bone fragments, presumably the remains of either meals or craft activity (i.e. textile production, antler and bone working) within the dwelling. Rubbish would have been literally underfoot, although there may have been some areas that were kept clean (such as around beds, or places where intricate and complex craftwork was ongoing).

There is also evidence that rubbish was periodically gathered up and dumped in a specific place on the site. On a few crannogs (e.g. Ballinderry 1, Moynagh Lough, Lough Faughan), there are pits and depressions that appear to have been used as cess-pits, places where people might have put their own bodily wastes (as well as other rubbish). On the same and other sites, rubbish is also placed in a specific zone or location, a midden, mound or dung-heap stretching across a small area. It is a striking feature of these middens (striking to modern eyes at least) that they are typically placed in locations that would have easily been to view to visitors. They were not hidden behind houses or wooden screens. In fact, they are often just outside house doorways or were placed close to the entrance of the site itself. On some sites, it is clear that rubbish was cast up against the wooden palisade, or tossed across it out into the lake-water and swamps surrounding the site. This was the case at Moynagh Lough, where bones were gathered up from the floors of houses, carried to the palisade and flung across it.³²

Middens are interesting features on early medieval crannogs and ringforts, and not only for the abundant information that they provide on early medieval diet, animal management and economy. They also provide information on how people may have perceived dirt in early Irish society, and how occasionally they used dirt to signal all kinds of interesting messages about social status, kinship, gender and community. The placing of rubbish at the site boundary, the palisade, supports the idea discussed above that early medieval communities placed a particular importance on boundaries, and understood them as significant edges. In many societies, dirt and rubbish is perceived as 'polluting' and dangerous, so is often placed at the edge of the dwelling because that is a spatially and mentally liminal location.³³ Indeed, this deposition is an action that often actually creates and sustains that boundary, separating the 'dwelling' from the 'outside'. It also reflects the fact that rubbish itself is a liminal substance, being an accumulation of

³² McCormick, *Stockrearing in Early Christian Ireland*, section 3.2

³³ Richard Hingley, 'Boundaries surrounding Iron Age and Romano-British settlements' in *Scott. Arch. Review*, 7 (1990), pp 96-104, at p. 100; Parker Pearson, 'Food, fertility and front doors in the first millennium BC', pp 117-32; Jo Brück, 'The Early-Middle Bronze Age transition in Wessex,

materials that is undergoing a state of transformation (i.e. rotting) and change.

Rubbish also has the potential to convey something to outsiders. Amongst some societies, waste is a powerful medium of communication, something that is deliberately displayed. Certainly, one of the first things that a visitor to a crannog would have seen (and smelled) would have been a midden slumped just outside the palisade, with dirt, bones, human waste and other rotting materials hanging from and lying beside the palisade posts. Upon entering the site, more middens could have been seen to left or right of the entrance, or in a pit beside a pathway. Although this has not previously been suggested in early medieval settlement studies, it is proposed here that these midden deposits were being actively used by early medieval people to show others what had been eaten in the house.

For example, a visitor to a high-status crannog might have seen the remains of prime joints of expensive meat, of cattle, pig, or horse skulls sitting on the midden rotting into the ground. On other low status sites, bones were similarly displayed to view outside the door of the house, to show what food people ate on the dwelling. It is also worth noting that in many small-scale societies, the bones from different animals are perceived and treated differently. Ethnographic studies indicate that skulls and jaw bones in particular, can often be prominently displayed to protect a site. In other words, the location of horse stallion skulls beside the house at Craigywarren and at Lagore may not have been entirely accidental.³⁴

Nagy has also pointed out that skulls (particularly of cats, dogs and pigs) were used in poetic divination. The poet, a sacred figure in early Irish literature, would eat taboo meats (e.g. dog), handle bones from the extremity of the body (i.e. lower limbs, skulls), in liminal places (behind the door, at the edge of the dwelling enclosure, out in the wilderness) to seek visions and seek super-normal knowledge (*imbas*). He also suggests that this *imbas* could be found in water, and that the poet would wait by a riverbank (a liminal zone between land and water) to gain it. Obviously, the palisade and the midden situated in this liminal zone may have been a potentially powerful place.³⁵ So, it is possible that some of these bones at the edge of the crannogs were used in quite interesting ways.

Sussex and the Thames Valley'. Unpublished PhD thesis (Cambridge, 1997), p. 159.

³⁴ Coffey, 'Craigywarren', pl. X.

³⁵ Nagy, 'Liminality and knowledge in Irish tradition', pp 136-9.

The occasional gender and symbolic associations between different animals and either men or women also indicates that complex gender relations can also be bound up with patterns of bone discard and disposal.³⁶ Early Irish literature indicates that there is a strong numinous association between cattle and women in early medieval Ireland.³⁷ They were considered to be responsible for dairying and production of foods. It is possible that this link continued to an association with cattle and calf bone abundant in virtually all early medieval middens.

However, as is clear from crannog excavations, the midden is not only made up of food, it can also contain a wide range of other materials, such as broken or discarded artefacts or the copper-alloy, iron waste and moulds from metalworking, the bone and antler off-cuts from making of combs and pins, or the fragments of leather left over from the making of shoes, belts and cloaks. In fact, some objects found in middens such as pins, brooches and other items would have been of considerably high social status. So in addition, the daily work and material wealth of the crannog's dwellers would similarly be exposed for unconscious approval and recognition.

Interpreting patterns of 'rubbish' and discard on crannogs

Most crannogs, excavated or not, produce middens of animal bone. Indeed, one of the main reasons why local communities dug into Irish crannogs in the nineteenth century (apart from the ragmen's and antiquarian's hunt for 'antiquities') was because they were perceived locally as 'bone-heaps'. In the late 1830s, men digging out the tumulus on the edge of a bog at Lagore Co. Meath were uncovering huge amounts of animal bones and it was suggested that about 150 cartloads of bones were removed and exported to Scotland for fertiliser before the site came to the notice of collectors. Similarly, in the 1840s drainage operations at Strokestown, Finlough and Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon local people removed tons of bone, while the largest crannog at Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon reputedly produced up to fifty tons of animal bone.

Recent archaeological surveys also commonly reveal the presence of bone middens on crannogs. In Westmeath, a similar pattern can be discerned. For example, on two of the crannogs on Lough Derravarragh that have produced early medieval finds (i.e. Coolure Demesne 1 and Ballynakill, see Appendix 2), large deposits of cattle, pig and sheep bone can be lying on the surfaces (Fig. 7.7; Fig. 7.8).

³⁶ Ian Hodder, *Symbols in action: Ethnoarchaeological studies of material culture* (Cambridge, 1982), p. 127, pp 155-61; David and Kramer *Ethnoarchaeology in action*, pp 126-7.

³⁷ Bitel, *Land of women*, pp 123-25.



Fig. 7.7 Most excavated early medieval crannogs have produced deep and rich middens of animal bone, rubbish and broken and discarded artefacts. These middens were often located outside the palisades, close to the entrances of the sites. In Westmeath, middens of deposits of animal bone can be identified on many sites (e.g. Newtownlow, Ballinderry No. 1, Ballynakill, Dryderstown). At the early medieval crannog at Coolure Demesne 1, on Lough Derravarragh, there is an extensive spread of animal bone in the water beside the oak plank palisade.



Fig. 7.8 Detail of broken and animal bone (cattle, pig, sheep/goat and some horse) on early medieval crannog at Coolure Demesne 1, Lough Derravarragh.

Obviously, the major crannog excavations have also produced huge amounts of bone. Intriguingly, on some sites it appears that bone midden deposits were actually taken from *another* settlement site and brought out onto a lake to be used to build the crannog. It is possible that this essentially practical use of midden as building material also served to symbolically link the ancestral or 'parent' dwelling with the newly created crannog. At Lough Faughan, Co. Down domestic refuse was found in the structural levels of the site, suggesting that it came from elsewhere during building operations.

At Clea Lakes, Co. Down the crannog was built of a layer of freshly quarried rock, sealed under a layer of peat, which was then covered by a 1m thick deposit of imported midden material. Most of the site's finds (e.g. souterrain pottery, crucibles, quern fragments, beads and bracelets, spindle whorls, whetstones) actually came from this re-used midden, presumably taken from a ringfort or other dwelling on the dryland.³⁸ At Moynagh Lough, bone may have been used as a flooring deposit, used in the same way as gravel to 'consolidate the soft and often wet crannog surface'.³⁹ On the other hand, this is not a constant, as some excavated early medieval crannogs have produced actually very few bones. At Lough More, Co. Mayo, there were only a few scraps of animal bone lying on the surface of this iron working site, perhaps indicating that it was not used as a dwelling place (in fact, bone may have been used as part of the industrial process of iron working).⁴⁰

Human bones in middens

Human remains have also been found as deposits outside palisades, as well as within the floor levels of some houses. Human bones, some with evidence for hacking or wounding, have been found in early medieval occupation levels at Lagore, Co. Meath,⁴¹ Cloonfinlough and Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon⁴² and at Killyvilla Lake, Co. Monaghan.⁴³ The Lagore early medieval crannog excavations produced two hundred human bones. These included two skulls from the base of the crannog (Pre-crannog and Period 1a phases). There were also fourteen pieces of cut occiputs (back and top of skulls) from Period 1a, Period 1b and Period 1 phases, as well as nine from outside the palisades, mostly from the northeast edge of the site. Other groups of bones, probably

³⁸ Collins and Proudfoot, 'Clea Lakes crannóg', pp 92-101

³⁹ McCormick, 'Interim report on the animal bones from Moynagh Lough', p. 87.

⁴⁰ An early medieval iron working surface at Mooghaun hillfort, Co. Clare produced extensive deposits of burnt and shattered bone. Eoin Grogan, pers. comm.

⁴¹ Hencken, 'Lagore', pp 198-203

⁴² Wood-Martin, *Lake-dwellings*, pp 237-238.

⁴³ D'Arcy, 'A crannog near Clones', p397

representing men, women and children were found below and in the brushwood layers of the crannog itself.⁴⁴ It is clear that some were there as a result of some type of extreme violence, as many were from headless bodies. The human skulls with cut occiputs indicated the beheading of victims, while other human remains had been thrown outside the palisade. At Cloonfinlough, Co. Roscommon, a human skull and two dugout boats were recovered from the edge of the site, along with early medieval bronze, iron and stone artefacts.⁴⁵ At Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon, a dug-out canoe was found outside the largest crannog, with a human skull, bronze spearhead and bronze pin with a twenty foot long iron chain and collar (a hostage or slave collar) beside it.⁴⁶

Ó Floinn has suggested that those human bones from crannogs that show evidence for pre-mortem violence could be interpreted as the ritual killing of slaves or hostages with the subsequent deposition of partial human remains into the lake.⁴⁷ It is certainly known from historical sources that early medieval crannogs were frequently venues for extreme violence, probably leading to the deaths of both combatants and inhabitants during battles and raids, while the annals reveal that on occasion prisoners, hostages and even guests were treacherously murdered.

There is certainly also a strong theme in the annals whereby powerful individuals were drowned in lakes. Obviously, this may occasionally have been accidental, occurring when a boat was upset or a party was routed during a raid, but it is also clear that it could be done deliberately, in a symbolic or ritual fashion. In the *Annals of the Four Masters*, for AD 849, there is the following entry,

Cinaeth, son of Conaing, lord of Cianachta Breagh, was drowned in the Ainge by the people of the king, Maelseachlainn, and Tighearnach, lord of Loch Gabhor, to revenge upon him the evils he had committed against the laity and the Church.⁴⁸

In the *Annals of Ulster* for AD 845, it is stated that ‘Tuirgeís was taken prisoner by Mael

⁴⁴ Hencken, ‘Lagore’, pp 198-203. It should be pointed out however that these human bones could be the remains of Bronze Age or Iron Age burials, although the deposition of whole human skeletons does not seem to be an aspect of Late Bronze Age burial traditions. On the other hand, at the early medieval royal site of Knowth was located on a prehistoric passage tomb, around which there were also Iron Age inhumations, some of which were mutilated.

⁴⁵ Kelly, ‘On certain antiquities recently discovered in the lake of Cloonfree’, pp 208-214; Wood-Martin, *lake-dwellings*, pp 233-239.

⁴⁶ Wood-Martin, *lake-dwellings*, p. 236.

⁴⁷ Ragnail Ó Floinn, ‘Recent research into Irish bog bodies’ in R.C. Turner and R.G. Scaife (eds.), *Bog bodies: new discoveries and new perspectives* (London, 1995), pp 137-145, at p. 144

⁴⁸ *A.F.M.* 849.8. This was clearly in revenge for a raid that he had carried out through Brega, as described in the previous year’s entry for *A.F.M.* 848.10.

Sechnaill and afterwards drowned in Loch Uair.⁴⁹ This probably refers to a ritual killing of this Viking leader in waters of Lough Owel, Co. Westmeath. Similarly, another deliberate execution by drowning is clearly and unambiguously described in the entry in the *Annals of the Four Masters* for AD 907,

The violation of Ard-Macha by Cearnachan, son of Duilgen, i.e. a captive was taken from the church, and drowned in Loch-Cirr, to the west of Ard-Macha. Cearnachan was soon afterwards drowned by Niall, son of Aedh, King of the North, in the same lake, in revenge of the violation of Patrick.⁵⁰

Similarly, in AD 1021, 'Branacán ua Maeluidir, tributary king of Míde, was drowned in Loch Ainnine (Lough Ennell) on May Day (although this may have been accidental).'⁵¹ Occasionally, men were drowned in lakes immediately after their islands had been taken from them. In the *Annals of the Four Masters* for AD 1121, it is stated that,

Cumaighe, son of Deoraidh Ua Floinn, lord of Durlas, was drowned in Loch-Eathach, after the island of Inis-Draicrenn had been taken upon him by the Uí-Eathach, where forty-four persons were slain.⁵²

There are several other, similar and enigmatic, references to drownings in lakes elsewhere in the annals.⁵³ In any case, there seems to have been an association between water and an unsuitable or shameful death, whereby drowning was seen as a dishonourable end. The deposition of bodies out at the edge of a crannog could also have been a deliberate slight or mark of disrespect, whereby the corpse was placed out 'with the rubbish' at the liminal boundary of the dwelling.⁵⁴

However, there are alternative explanations. At Ballinderry No. 1 crannog, the human skull fragment, jawbone and right scapula (shoulder blade) were actually recovered from beneath the floor levels of the eleventh-century house 1. The jawbone was found 'very close to the hearth'.⁵⁵ Human bones are often found within houses and dwelling enclosures on prehistoric sites, where they are usually interpreted as 'foundation

⁴⁹ *A.U.* 845.8

⁵⁰ *A.F.M.* 907.6

⁵¹ *A.U.* 1021.4.

⁵² *A.F.M.* 1121.4.

⁵³ Other drownings of kings, poets and churchmen in lakes are mentioned in the following annals; e.g. *A.U.* 1121.2, *A.U.* 1125.2, *A.U.* 1321.2, *A.U.* 1339.1, *A.F.M.* 742.17, *A.F.M.* 1067.6, *A.F.M.* 1074.10, *A.F.M.* 1092.5 (see Appendix 1 for details of each).

⁵⁴ Interestingly, there is an intriguing reference in the medieval *life* of Findchua of Brí-Gobann, where the Uí Néill are routed in a battle with the Munstermen 'and a multitude of them is beheaded, and their heads are gathered into one place, and put into Loch Silenn (Lough Sheelin Co. Cavan), which to-day is called Loch Cenn (Lake of Heads)' W. Stokes, *Lives of the saints from the Book of Lismore*, § 3253.

deposits', being human remains (often of children) placed within the floor of the house and designed to protect the dwelling's inhabitants. These may have been household members who continued to exist with the family after their deaths. It is possible that similar pagan ideas co-existed with Christian beliefs in early medieval Ireland. It is also worth remembering the associations the early medieval Irish had between death and islands (see Chapter 4 above), so that human burial within a house on an island may have had some magical or ritual function.

Middens outside houses

It is evident that substantial amounts of animal bone and rubbish accumulated in and around houses, often buried underneath the floors or scattered around the outside of the house walls. At Craigywarren, Moynagh Lough, Ballinderry no. 1 and Lough Faughan, there were large quantities of animal bone generally strewn around the occupation deposits or within the house floors. However, bone was also found immediately outside the houses, lying around the walls or just outside the doorways. This depositing of animal bone immediately outside the door of a house can be seen most clearly at Sroove. In the Phase 3 levels, the bone lay on the surface of the crannog, just in front of the door, as well as off to the right towards the lake. In this case, a person entering the house would have literally walked across the meals of the people. By Phase 4, the bone was found all over the site. Indeed, it almost made a floor level on the east side of the island, close to the water. This perhaps signifies an increased tendency to place the bone at the 'edge' of the site.

Middens at the palisades

Middens can be found both inside and outside crannog palisades. Unfortunately, it can be frequently impossible to phase these deposits, as they simply accumulated across time in watery shallows and were then not excavated with any close stratigraphy recorded. At Craigywarren, the midden was at the northeast at the crannog palisade, comprising cattle, sheep/goat and pig bone, as well as three 'very fine' horse skulls. Other finds from this midden included an iron pan and fragments of leather shoes.⁵⁶ At Ballinderry no. 2, Hencken states that,

immediately outside the palisade (of the ninth-century crannog) upon the level of the old swamp or shallow lake was an enormous accumulation of food bones, chips

⁵⁵ H.L. Movius, 'The human remains', in Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', pp 227-230.

⁵⁶ Coffey, 'Craigywarren',

and fragments of wood, and other debris from the crannog. This was particularly abundant on the eastern and southern sides where the deposits were deeper.⁵⁷

This bone included huge amounts of cattle bone, as well as significant quantities of pig (mostly young animals), and some sheep/goat, horse. Skulls of these animals were also present, though there is little evidence for their being placed anywhere in particular. Although it is not clear if they were found in the middens, some of site's early medieval artefacts (including a sword, spade, textiles and wooden objects) were also recovered from outside the palisade. At Ballinderry No. 1, the largest accumulation of bone was at the palisade at the north side of the crannog, 'furthest from the house'. Hencken reckoned that as there were several other artefactual finds from this part of the site (including a wooden gaming board), that this was the 'rubbish heap of the crannog'.⁵⁸

At Moynagh Lough, the middens from the crannog lay outside the palisade, and were particularly thick across the north, east and west side of the island. Bradley opined that these unphased layers of habitation debris were the 'rubbish tip' of the island. They were rich in animal bones and also produced large amounts of small finds, such as objects of wood (including a separate-bladed shovel that might have been used to cast material over the palisade),⁵⁹ leather and even gold (a small piece of filigree). McCormick's detailed faunal studies of the animal bone from Moynagh Lough have enabled a reconstruction of the diet and economy of the island's dwellers.⁶⁰ He also states that the largest concentrations of bone were found 'directly outside the palisade' that surrounded the site. Interestingly, the place with the densest distribution of animal bones was the midden just beside the entrance to the island on the north side, where it would be most visible. At this location, there were the remains of at least 262 animals (cattle 40 per cent, pig 37 per cent, sheep 27 per cent and horse 1 per cent).⁶¹ His faunal studies of all bones from outside the palisade indicated the presence of large numbers of cattle (38 per cent), pig (35 per cent), sheep (24 per cent), with smaller numbers of horse (3 per cent), cat, dog (probably pets), otter, hare and wolf (probably caught for their skins). Significantly however, cattle accounted for about 80 per cent of the meat weight consumed on the site. Females, or dairy cows, predominated (66 per cent) in the bovine bone record and were only killed when they had past their prime, while male calves were

⁵⁷ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog No. 2', p. 31

⁵⁸ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog No. 1', p. 118.

⁵⁹ Bradley, 'A separate-bladed shovel from Moynagh Lough', pp 117-22.

⁶⁰ McCormick, 'Dairying and beef production in Early Christian Ireland, the faunal evidence', pp 253-267; McCormick, 'Interim report on the animal bones from Moynagh Lough', pp 86-90; McCormick, 'Cows, ringforts and the origin of Early Christian Ireland', pp 33-37.

⁶¹ McCormick, 'Stock-rearing in Early Christian Ireland, Fig. 3.8.

slaughtered at a young age. This fits with what might be expected from an intensive dairying regime. Most of the cattle were slaughtered off-site and only meat joints were taken on to the island. Pigs were usually mature on slaughtering, and perforations in their shoulder blades indicated that they may have been cured and hung (perhaps inside a storage shed on the island). Sheep (being immature) were probably kept more for their meat than for wool.

McCormick has also recently suggested an interesting social context to the consumption of food on Moynagh Lough.⁶² In early medieval Ireland, providing hospitality was an enforced legal obligation on some social classes, and a noble and his retinue (between forty to sixty persons) would expect to be fed and billeted at the home of one of his significant vassals. During the season of feasting, between New Year's Day and Shrovetide (when excess animals would be slaughtered at time of fodder shortage), the noble would thereby arrive at his vassal's dwelling and would be provided with food and bedding for a period of two days and two nights. It was also possible for a feast to take place at the royal residence of a king, but others would still provide the food as food rent. Food is ordered in early Irish law, like so much else, according to grades of social status. It was understood that different qualities of cuts of beef, as well as different grains (i.e. wheat, barley and oats) were considered as appropriate foods for kings, nobles or commoners.

One of the interesting aspects of the cattle bone from Moynagh Lough is that the bones from all types of cuts of beef are present, from the tenderloin and fillet (high-status meats, for kings, lords and other significant personages) down to the ankles (given to lower status craftsmen). McCormick suggests that this indicates that because this is a high-status site (as evident by the roundhouses and finds), inhabited by not a large group of people (i.e. there were only two houses in the eighth-century levels), it is significant that more than just the high-status cuts that were being brought out to the island. In fact, he suggests that the presence in the middens of virtually all of the cattle carcass indicates that feasts being held on the crannog at certain times of the year, when a larger than normal social group would gather there.

It is interesting then that the Moynagh Lough middens were distributed across what might be called the 'front' or north side of the island. This is because in Phase X, this

⁶² Finbar McCormick, 'The distribution of meat in a hierarchical society: the Irish evidence' in Preston Miracle and Nicky Milner (eds.), *Consuming passions and patterns of consumption*, (Cambridge, 2001), pp 25-32.

north side was the location for a possible entrance and pathway into the crannog. It might be suggested then that a person approaching the island by boat from the north (the location of a possible early medieval raised rath or motte and church at Nobber) or the west (where there are a number of early medieval ringforts on the hill overlooking the lake) would have first seen the midden deposits slumped against the palisade. The midden and its visible evidence for high-status feasting may have served to signal to this observer that this was a socially and culturally significant location for the wider community.

However, the occupants of low status crannogs seem to have consumed essentially the same meats, at least in terms of range of animal species if not in sheer volume. Lofqvist's faunal studies on the small early medieval crannog occupation levels at Sroove, Co. Sligo indicate that the bone assemblage was generally typical of other early medieval sites, with a preponderance of dairy cattle, with some pig, sheep, and lesser amounts of horse.⁶³ Wild animals and fish were present in insignificant amounts. On the phase 3 level, the crannog's inhabitants may have eaten (or used their bones for crafts) at least sixteen cattle, twelve pigs, eight sheep, six horses, one deer, as well as one wild duck and one hare across that level's lifespan. Moreover, much the same range of classes of meat were provisioned onto the crannog, perhaps challenging McCormick's ideas.

Yet, there were some interesting differences between Sroove, and the higher-status sites at Lagore and Moynagh Lough. At Sroove, the bone was virtually all crushed and fragmentary and skulls or even whole bones were rare or non-existent. This might reflect the fact that the bone was exposed to fires and was crushed underfoot as people walked back and forth. It might also indicate the practice of smashing the bones to extract all the bone marrow (and less waste). On Sroove, there was also a significantly higher percentage of phalanges and metapodials, these being the low meat-bearing parts of the animal (i.e. ankles, etc). It suggests that cattle were driven onto the islet itself and slaughtered and butchered right beside the house. These types of bones were absent from Lagore and Moynagh Lough, suggesting that on those sites, the cattle had been slaughtered somewhere else, cut up and the meat then brought to the island. There was also a slightly higher percentage of horse eaten or used at Sroove, suggesting that this meat, although its consumption was frowned upon by the early Irish church, was being eaten on the crannog. These animal bones were also scattered abundantly across the site, in front of doorways and down towards the edges of the palisade.

⁶³ Camilla Lofqvist, 'The animal bones', in Fredengren, *Crannogs*, (CD-ROM Vol. 2, Appendices),

Cesspits

There is also some evidence for particular concentrations of waste in pits within crannogs (such refuse pits being actually quite rare on early medieval settlement sites in Ireland). A cesspit was investigated at Moynagh Lough phase X (dated to the early eighth century). This was a sub-rectangular dug feature (1.7m x 1.3m), filled with lenses of dung, alternating with narrow fibrous lenses composed of straw and leaves (presumably the 'wiping' material used in the toilet). It had been re-cut on two occasions, presumably meaning that it had been cleaned out at least once. The cesspit was located in full view on the north side of the roundhouse, between it and the palisade. It was situated just inside the entrance to the crannog, off to the right of the end of a timber pathway that led into the site. It was also dug into the west edge of metalworking area 1, suggesting that when that ceased to be a dump for metalworking debris, it became a dump for human waste.⁶⁴

Similar dug pits have been noted on other crannog sites, although their function is less clear. At Ballinderry no. 1, a double pit was located to the east of House III, between its walls and the palisade, towards the end of the eleventh century use of the site. Similarly, at Ballinderry no. 2, a pit was located at the north edge of the site, just inside the pile palisade of the ninth-century crannog. Hencken regarded it as a well (for no better reason than it filled with water when cleared out), and it was found to be filled with bone and gravel, with a blue-glass bead suggesting its early medieval date. A patch of gravel beside it provided a stable place to stand. This was probably also a cesspit, again visible from the site entrance.⁶⁵ If these are all cesspits, they establish an interesting link between human waste and the site boundary.

A prosaic event is described in a story entitled 'The death of the three sons of Diarmait son of Cerball', purporting to have taken place in AD 651. In the story, the king Diarmait Ruanaid (obit *A.U.* 664) collects an army at his crannog at Lagore to avenge the death of his nephews at the hands of the Leinstermen. He demands that the killer, one Maelodran, is given up to him. The Leinstermen refuse, but Maelodran offers to give himself up. He goes alone to the brink of the island (*for bru indsi Gabar*) and waits

pp 142-184.

⁶⁴ Bradley, 'Moynagh Lough: an insular workshop', p. 76.

⁶⁵ Hencken, 'Ballinderry crannog no. 2', p. 31; Newman, *Ballinderry Lough*, p. 123 agrees that this was a refuse pit, although associated it with the sixth-century pre-crannog occupation. In this writer's opinion, the lack of wicker surround (as found on the earlier site), and the fact that it is directly inside the ninth-century crannog's palisade suggests that it is indeed a cess pit from that crannog occupation.

until night at the island's 'port'. When his enemies had ceased rowing back and forth from the island, he takes a boat and goes out and waits by the royal house (*riitheac*) In the middle of the night, the king comes out to 'bend his knees' (i.e. to defecate). In front of the house he meets with an enemy, Maelodran. Not recognising him, the king instructs him to 'bring me a wisp', whereupon Maelodran mischievously brings him a handful of nettles, and kindly holds Diarmait's sword while he goes about his business. It is only when the king painfully wipes his bottom with the nettles that he realises that he has been tricked. Threatened with death, he negotiates with Maelodran, to the latter's benefit.⁶⁶

Houses and dwellings on early medieval crannogs: theatres for social encounters

Introduction

Moving on into the interior space of the crannog, a person could then have walked up to the door of the house, before going in. In early medieval Ireland, houses were hugely significant places in people's daily lives. This was where the family or extended household slept, ate food, gathered for social occasions and extended hospitality to their wider kin and neighbours. The house was the venue for the enactment of various social relationships, it was a storehouse of traditional knowledge and values and was also an artefact of both practical and symbolic action. The size, shape, form, location, function and internal spatial variations of houses are seen by anthropologists as amongst the best means of reconstructing the social organisation, way of life and culture of past peoples. The house can also often be seen as a metaphor for society. People living or growing up in a house would have learned from its lay-out and social and symbolic space, their own place in society and how social relationships worked.

Early Irish laws, narrative literature and hagiographies provide a range of anecdotal detail about activities within houses, as well as vivid descriptions of fantastic houses that are perhaps metaphorical and clearly owe more to the imagination than to any real-life dwelling. The eighth-century law text *Críth Gablach*, also provides an amazingly detailed discussion of the size of houses, construction details and the types of domestic equipment used within them. A significant theme in these various sources is the importance of the ordering and use of social space within dwellings, with a predictable

⁶⁶ Kuno Meyer (ed.), 'The death of the three sons of Diarmait mac Cerrbeóil', in *Anecdota Oxoniensia* (Oxford, 1894), p. 70; cited in Price, 'The history of Lagore, from the annals and other sources' in Hencken, *Lagore*, pp 18-34, at p. 32.

emphasis on social status, gender and age as organising principles. It was expected that people knew where to sit, move and work, using such fixtures and features as doorways, hearths and seating arrangements, to orientate their movements around the house.

There is also very good archaeological evidence for early medieval houses in Ireland (particularly between the seventh and the tenth century AD). Archaeologists have developed a good understanding of their architectural development in terms of their location, shape, size, building materials and internal features.⁶⁷ The earliest structures in the early medieval period (between AD 500-800) were usually roundhouses, constructed of post-and-wattle walls, with wooden poles for joists and roofs of thatch of reed, turf or straw. Most were fairly small, typically 4-5m in diameter. Some were slightly larger, 6-10m in diameter. The enclosed house space was typically about 45m², comprising a single small room. It is probable that these sizes were closely related to social rank, so that both custom and law restricted an individual from building larger than a certain size. However, even the largest houses in early medieval Ireland were relatively small by contemporary European standards. There is no evidence for use of rings of internal roof supports to make significantly larger houses (as is common on Iron Age British sites). In early medieval Ireland, people chose instead to build a second structure and attach it to the larger house, to create a figure-of-eight shape. This backhouse or *cúile* may have been used as a kitchen, sleeping area or private or exclusive space. Roundhouses tend to be located in the centre of enclosures.

There is a significant change from the use of roundhouses to rectilinear houses after about AD 800. Towards the end of the early medieval period (tenth to eleventh centuries), rectangular houses built in stone or turf were normal, and roundhouses became rare. On most sites where there is clear dating evidence, roundhouses are actually replaced by rectangular structures. These rectangular houses were typically built in stone, earth, turf shape, with an average measurement of 6-8m in length. They were simply constructed, of low stone walls, lines of boulders, with internal wooden poles to support roof of reed, turf or straw. Rectangular houses, although they have the same floor space as round houses, are often paved. They also tend to be found closer to entrances and towards the sides of enclosures. The reasons for this transition in architectural styles from round houses to rectangular houses remains unclear. However, it could be suggested that it relates to significant changes in early Irish society. At the time of this

⁶⁷ C.J. Lynn, 'Early Christian period domestic structures: a change from round to rectangular plans?' in *Ir. Archaeol Research Forum* 5, (1978), pp 29-45; Lynn, 'Houses in rural Ireland, A.D. 500-1000', pp 81-94; Lynn, 'Deer Park Farms'; Lynn, 'Early medieval houses'.

architectural transition (the eighth and ninth century), social changes included an increasing centralisation of power, an increased focus on smaller familial groups, more restrictive or individualistic land ownership practices. The ownership and use of a rectangular house, which could more easily be divided up into compartments and sections may have went hand-in-hand with changes in ideas about personal status, wealth and concepts of private and public space.

Lifecycles of early medieval houses

It is possible that many early medieval roundhouses could have been quite short-lived structures (lasting not more than 15-20 years). On the other hand, a well-built roundhouse, if carefully maintained and protected, could potentially last as long as 60-70 years, or about the lifetime of an individual. It is interesting then that within the archaeological evidence from early medieval Ireland, it is possible to identify some ways in which the beginning, and end, of houses seem to have been marked by particular actions. Many early medieval houses show evidence for having been rebuilt or replaced at precisely the same location, such as at Leacanabuile, Co. Cork,⁶⁸ Dressogagh, Co. Armagh⁶⁹ and Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim. This replacement could be interpreted as a re-building cycle that was establishing a historical continuity and symbolic link with the earlier dwelling.

There is also intriguing archaeological evidence from early medieval houses in Ireland for activity involving the placing of artefacts in the ground which seem to mark the end of the life of one house and perhaps the beginning of the next. Interestingly, these deliberate deposits seem to be mostly objects such as quernstones, wooden troughs and plough parts - all items associated with agricultural labour and the domestic production of food. At an early medieval unenclosed dwelling at 'The Spectacles', Co. Limerick, a broken quernstone was left right in front of the door of a roundhouse, on top of the paving just where it would have been awkward to step across.⁷⁰ Similarly, at Drumaroad ringfort, Co. Down, two broken quernstones were deposited just south of the house doorway, alongside the paving.⁷¹ It is possible that these were actions marking the death of the house, whereby the house's quern was deliberately broken just before the house was abandoned. Brück has recently suggested from similar evidence that Bronze Age roundhouses in southern Britain had *lifecycles* that were related in a practical and

⁶⁸ Ó Riordáin and Foy, 'The excavation of Leacanabuile stone fort', pp 85-91.

⁶⁹ A.E.P. Collins, 'Excavations at Dressogagh Rath, Co. Armagh' in *U.J.A.* 29, (1966), pp 117-129.

⁷⁰ S.P. O'Riordáin, 'Lough Gur excavations... and the Spectacles', pp 39-111.

⁷¹ Dudley Waterman, 'The excavation of a house and souterrain at White Fort, Drumaroad, Co.

metaphorical sense to those of their inhabitants. This can hardly be surprising, as the main events of a person's life, his birth, transition from childhood to adulthood, marriage, and ultimate death – could all potentially occur within a house. It is possible the early medieval houses in Ireland were also linked in people's minds to the life and death of the household's primary owner.

Interpreting houses on early medieval crannogs

There is a range of interesting questions then to be asked of houses on crannogs. Their physical scale, form, construction and internal arrangements provides information on the size, social status and make-up of the family group, household or social group that used them. The use of the internal space of the house and how this may change across time is also worth examining. Such evidence could be used to explore how houses were re-used, re-ordered and their internal spaces re-negotiated across their life-span. There is evidence of the re-laying of house floors, with the periodic introduction of gravels, clays and brushwood into the house suggesting either long-term re-use or a periodic returning to the site. The presence of artefacts and rubbish within the house floors can also reveal interesting aspects of the use of these houses. It is possible to show on several sites that hearths were re-built and changed, again signifying rhythms of continuity and change.

In recent years, archaeologists have suggested various ways of interpreting the social organisation of space within early houses, although this has rarely been attempted in Ireland. These studies tend to focus on questions of how space was organised, how movement was physically and symbolically guided around the dwelling, and which locations were used for different types of activities.⁷² Even within a simple circular structure, people could have used key structural features and subtle differences in light, warmth and customary practice to organise the house. Thus, a circular house can have a *front* (typically the well-lit area towards the doorway) and a *back* (in darkness against the back wall). Standing at the door, it can have a *left* and a *right* side. The central roof supporting post and the hearth can serve as the focus for the *centre*, while the walls can be seen as *peripheral*. There is possibly also a vertical spacing to be considered, moving from the muds of the *floor* level, up into the joists and thatch of the *roof*.

Down' in *U.J.A.* 19 (1956), pp 73-86.

⁷² Social and symbolic interpretations of Iron Age houses are provided by, Fitzpatrick, 'Outside in: the structure of an early Iron Age house', pp 68-72; Hingley, 'Public and private space: domestic organisation and gender relations amongst Iron Age and Romano-British households', pp 125-48; Oswald, 'A doorway on the past: practical and mystic concerns in the orientation of roundhouse doorways', pp 87-95; Parker-Pearson, 'Food, fertility and front doors in the first millennium BC', pp 117-32; Giles and Parker-Pearson, 'Learning to live in the Iron Age: dwelling and praxis', pp 217-31.

Some archaeologists have argued that this organisation of space was culturally encoded, based on structural, cosmological beliefs about the world. Particularly influential have been recent studies of Iron Age roundhouses in Britain that argue the house was essentially a microcosm of the cosmos, with daily activity and movement closely related to the daily and seasonal movement of the sun. It is argued that the hearth was a hub around which people moved in a 'sunwise' (i.e. clockwise) direction and that the spatial organisation of activities within the house reflected this. On east facing houses, food preparation, weaving or other work associated with the brightness of day seem to have been carried out on the left hand or south side of the house, while nightly activities such as sleeping were in the right hand or north of the house. Deliberate deposits of animal bone placed in pits in the floor (often near doors) served to signify social, temporal and spatial distinctions around the dwelling.⁷³ It is not at all clear that similar patterns can be seen in early medieval houses in Ireland. However, it may be useful to start thinking about early medieval houses as places that both structured and enabled people to think about the world in certain ways.

House form, size and location

Houses, or possible ones, have been found on most of the early medieval crannogs that have been excavated (e.g. Moynagh Lough, Rathtinaun, Sroove, Lough Faughan, Craigywarren, Ballinderry no. 1, Ballinderry no. 2), and they range significantly in form, size, location and internal features. Briefly stated, it is evident that most are roundhouses (e.g. all five of the sixth to eighth-century Moynagh Lough houses, the small tenth-century circular house on the primary crannog at Ballinderry no. 1, as well as the undated early medieval houses at Lough Faughan (i.e. 'hearth 4') and Rathtinaun. These range in size, with some significantly large structures (e.g. Moynagh Lough phase Y house at 11.2m diam., Rathtinaun house at 10.5m diam.), although most typically measure 4-6m in diameter. A striking aspect of the use of houses on crannogs is the extent to which they were often re-built on the same spot, such as at Sroove, Moynagh Lough, Ballinderry no. 1. On the other hand, they also shift in location across time, drifting slightly across the site (as between the various phases at Moynagh Lough) or moving from the centre towards the palisade or periphery (e.g. as at Ballinderry no. 1).

⁷³ Discussions of the cosmology of Iron Age house spaces include, Fitzpatrick, 'Outside in: the structure of an early Iron Age house', pp 68-72; Giles and Parker-Pearson, 'Learning to live in the Iron Age: dwelling and praxis', pp 217-31; Michael Parker Pearson and Niall Sharples, *Between land and sea: Excavations at Dun Vullan, South Uist* (Sheffield, 1999), pp 350-53.



Fig. 7.9 The Phase 2 'Primary Crannog' house at the early medieval crannog of Ballinderry No. 1, Co. Westmeath. This house (dated to the mid eleventh century AD) was 5m in diameter, with a floor of brushwood and clay. It was surrounded by a horseshoe shaped timber walkway, and was located inside a modestly-sized, palisaded (15m diameter) crannog (Source: Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', Pl. XIII).

Admittedly on some of the crannogs it can be difficult to identify the precise floor plan of the house. At Craigywarren, there was certainly a timber platform at the north edge of the site. On top of these jointed planks was a small hearth, while a midden was situated close by. However, it is impossible to confirm that this was a house.⁷⁴ At Ballinderry No. 2, a house was probably located in the southeast quadrant of the ninth-century crannog. Unfortunately again, the floor plan of this house was largely destroyed by nineteenth-century digging. The house was probably constructed on a foundation of horizontal oak and ash posts, which formed an extensive timber platform. Blocks of peat and brushwood had been laid in the spaces between the timbers. There was a hearth on the north side of the platform and there was a floor of ashes, clay and charcoal, 7m across, 45cm in depth.⁷⁵

At Ballinderry no. 1, a rectangular house (c.6m x 6m) built of horizontal logs probably preceded the construction of the primary crannog. It may have been enclosed within a

⁷⁴ Coffey, 'Craigywarren', p 112.

⁷⁵ Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 2'.

ring of posts.⁷⁶ Intriguingly, this structure could have been similar in design to contemporary Hiberno-Norse houses excavated from mid to late tenth-century Dublin.⁷⁷ Artefacts from this occupation level also suggest strong links between this midlands site and Dublin in the tenth and eleventh centuries AD. In the early to mid eleventh century AD, a modestly sized crannog (15m diameter) on the same site was the location for a circular house (Fig. 7.9). This house (5m in diameter), was constructed on top of a foundation built of a redeposited layer of black, sterile peat and timber. The house had a floor of brushwood and clay. Surrounding it was a timber walkway, arranged around it in a horse-shoe shaped fashion, with a gap to the south suggesting an entrance in that area. Towards the end of the use of Ballinderry no. 1, there were also at least two rectilinear houses (or perhaps one large rectangular house) at the northern side of the site.

Similarly, at Lough Faughan, there is no clearly discernible house plan. However, in the early medieval occupation levels, there was a large (4.6m in diameter, 60cm in thickness) circular 'hearth' (the excavator's 'Hearth 4'). This was centrally located within the crannog, and consisted of a spread of clay laid on the damp peat that had been reddened by burning. It consisted of at least seven layers of grey ash, yellow clay and charcoal, and produced a bone pin and a fragment of Samian ware (both items that could easily be found within a house).

At Rathtinaun, there was a definite single roundhouse in the early medieval phase IV occupation.⁷⁸ The crannog had been rebuilt using sods cut from the foreshore, with grass, plants, rushes, wood and stones. This material was reveted around by two rows of squared oak posts on the crannog's east side, presenting a wooden palisade to the shoreline 30m away. A single roundhouse was placed on this surface (10.5m diam.), constructed of large oak posts spaced at 20-30cm intervals. It only clearly survived on its southern side, and was probably demolished towards the end of its life (with posts pulled up from northern side). It probably had an entrance on the east facing the shoreline. The hearth was unenclosed, and had been built upon the traces of earlier Period III hearths used on the site.

Probably the best sequence of houses has been found on the early medieval crannog at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath, including at least five houses dating to between the late

⁷⁶ Hencken, 'Ballinderry No. 1', pp 107-8 ; Johnson, 'Ballinderry crannóg No. 1: a reinterpretation', pp 32-8.

⁷⁷ P.F. Wallace, 'The archaeological identity of the Hiberno-Norse town' in *R.S.A.I. Jn*, 122, (1992) 35-65.

sixth and the early eighth century.⁷⁹ In the earliest phases, there were at least two houses. In Phase U (probably dated to the late sixth-century), there was a possible small hut (3m diam.) with a spudstone at the entrance and charcoal-rich floor. Finds from its vicinity included E-ware, an iron shield boss and a rectangular bronze mount. In Phase W (dated to about AD 690-720), there was a circular house with an east facing entrance, a possible rectangular stone-lined hearth, with finds including a bronze pennanular brooch. In Phase X (dated to early eighth century), a medium-sized roundhouse (7.5m diam) was situated towards the north of the site, between two metalworking areas and to the right of the entrance as a person walked in. In Phase Y (probably dated to about AD 748), there were two roundhouses. One was spectacularly large (11.2m external diameter), constructed of a double row of poles. It had a central hearth complex and a laid floor. It also had a series of internal partitions now evident by stake holes. These may have been benches and beds, as they were arranged around the house against the walls. This house appears to have been built on the site of the earlier phase X house. Slightly to the north, there was also a smaller roundhouse (5.2m diam.), also with an internal stone-lined hearth (Fig. 7.10; Fig. 7.11a; Fig. 7.11b).



Fig. 7.10 View of Phase Y (mid eighth-century) house at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. (Photo: John Bradley).

⁷⁸ Rathtinaun Crannog 61 site archive, Dept. of Archaeology, UCD.

⁷⁹ Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' (1991), pp 5-26 ; Bradley, Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1980-1984, Unpublished site archive report (Dublin, 1984).

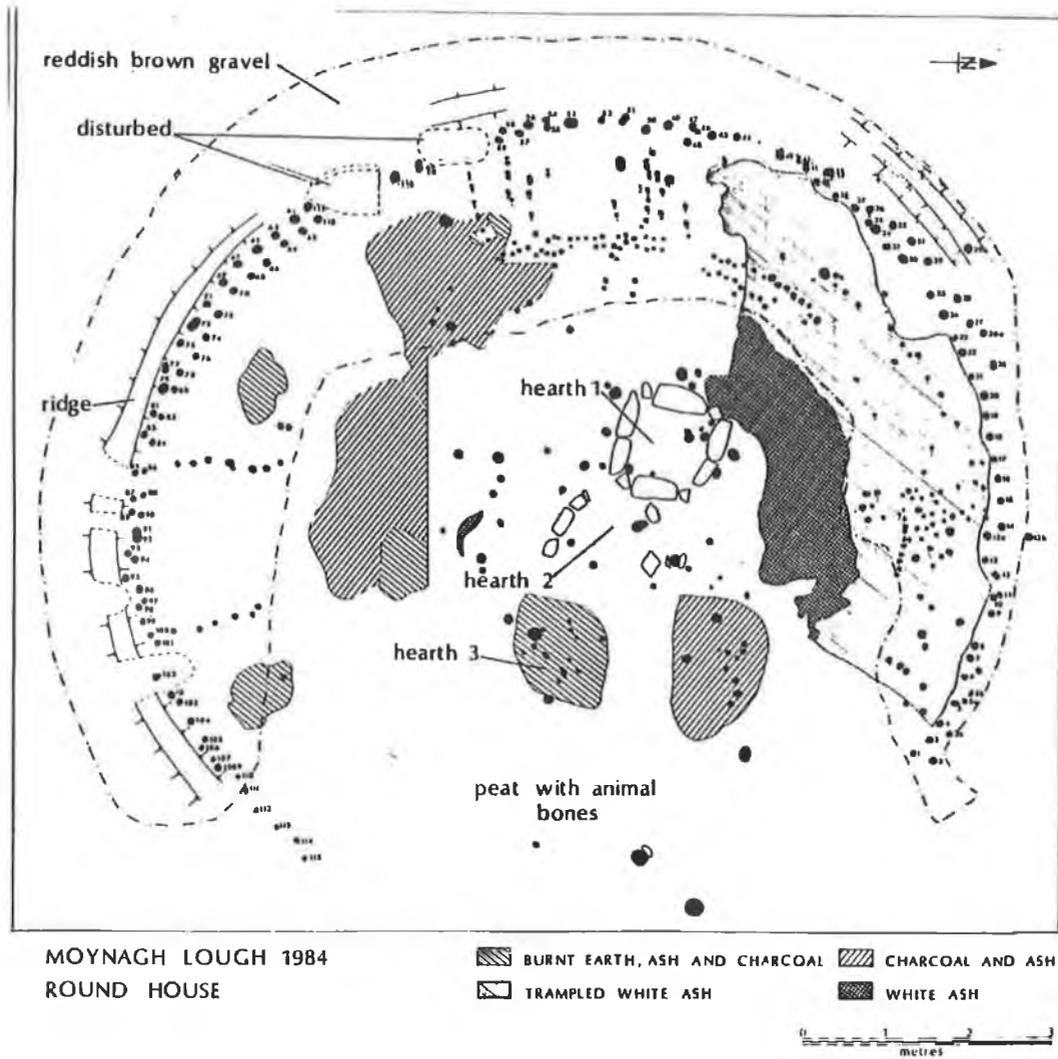


Fig. 7.11a Plan of Phase Y (mid eighth-century) house at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. The house saw frequent re-use of its central hearths, and re-layering of its floors with clay, gravel and bone. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, pp 29-30).

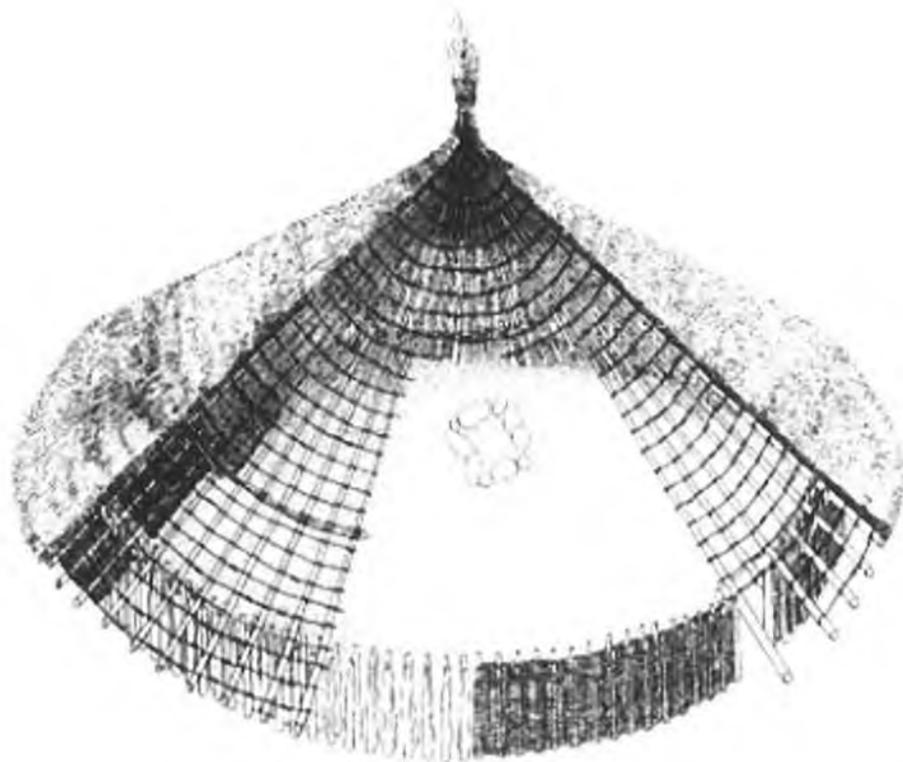


Fig.7.11b Reconstruction of Phase Y (mid eighth-century) house at Moynagh Lough crannog, Co. Meath. Internally, there were beds and benches, and the distribution of food debris, metalworking waste and personal objects and equipment hints at the social organisation of its internal spaces (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, pp 29-30).

At Sroove, there were at least two phases of house construction and inhabitation on that small, shoreline crannog.⁸⁰ These were small rectangular or oval structures, centrally placed within the island, and enclosed with a palisade, c. 17m across. In Phase 2, a wooden house (6.5m x 8m internally) was represented by an oval or rectangular arrangement of closely spaced posts, protected by stone on the lakeward side. It had a central post, a hearth, a floor of brushwood and a possible entrance to the southwest. This was succeeded in Phase 3 by a similar structure that was more difficult to trace, but it did have a floor of flagstones and a hearth. The Sroove house is radically different in scale to the structures at Moynagh Lough, probably representing the dwelling of a small social unit, probably a nuclear family.

However, it is now also clear that some crannogs occupation levels definitely did not have houses or any formal dwelling structures. On some sites, this may be due to the inadequate scale of excavation (e.g. Clea Lakes, Lough Faughan), poor standards of

recording or the destruction of occupation levels by modern diggings. However, it is particularly evident that there is a real absence of crannogs on some small crannogs. This is particularly the case at Lough More and at Sroove phase 4. On both these sites, the surface of the crannog consisted only of a large spread of flagstones spread across the site. Although there were furnaces, mortars and spreads of iron slag, there were no defined or domestic hearths, no post-holes or any stone walls suggesting the use of any formal house structure.

The lack of such houses should be seen in a positive way, signifying that houses were not always the significant locus for activity on crannogs. It also raises the question whether these sites were places used for events/activities not associated with daily domestic life. People may have travelled to and from these places, but not have resided there. This question will be raised again below in relation to metalworking on crannogs.

Doorways and entrances

Doorways can be clearly identified on only two crannog houses, largely because of their destruction by later habitation deposits on other sites. At Moynagh Lough, in the eighth-century roundhouse in Phase Y, the door was probably at the northeastern side (its southern jamb defined by two posts), facing the centre of the site and the crannog entrance. At Sroove, in the rectangular house in Phase 2, there was a narrow door facing the southwest, mostly defined by a gap in the house wall and some brushwood paving. The door looked back towards the shore, but unlike Moynagh Lough, it was not clearly visible from the entrance to the crannog. This is an interesting feature, seemingly indicating that access and visibility of the door was being controlled in some way.

Frequently, doorways in houses within early medieval ringforts face directly towards the site entrance, and this enabled a person sitting in the house to watch visitors entering the enclosure. A stranger would therefore be under the gaze of the house. In fact, in most early medieval roundhouses in Ireland, doorways are typically oriented to the east or southeast. This is typically interpreted as practical in intent, aimed at providing shelter from any prevailing wet, southwesterly winds. However, it could also have been a cultural norm, with the doorway facing the rising sun in the morning.

It could also be suggested that doorways were occasionally oriented in different directions as a signifier of social status or the role of the house (Moynagh Lough, clearly a high-

⁸⁰ Fredengren, *Crannogs*, pp 226-32.

status house, faces northeast, while Sroove with its southwest facing door is probably a 'poor' person's crannog). At Ballyutoag, Co. Antrim, on an early medieval upland enclosure (with radiocarbon dates indicating use in the seventh to eighth century AD) perhaps associated with summer cattle herding, the doors of the houses do not face the 'normal' direction to the southeast, but towards the southwest, perhaps signifying the fact that these are not 'normal' dwellings, but temporary, seasonal habitations.⁸¹ On balance however, it is most likely that doorway orientation is something that is essentially local, with views of the surrounding shoreline and activity within the crannog the most significant factor.

Floor surfaces: palimpsests of human history

Floor surfaces are obviously present on most of the identified houses in early medieval crannogs. Interestingly, these vary significantly in their texture and form. It is clear that people actually made floor surfaces by introducing layers of various raw materials, such as brushwood, wattle screens, layers of peats, clays and gravels, and occasionally stone paving. It is also evident that these floor levels are built up over time in sequences, being gradually raised both by the natural detritus of daily living and as part of the deliberate renewal of house spaces. These floors are not always continuous, vary in their depth across a house (from the centre to the edges), and were also subject to constant human and perhaps animal trampling.

On some crannogs, particularly some of the earlier excavations, it can be difficult to distinguish between such multiple and intercalated layers of peat, clay and ash that would also have shifted as the crannog slumped. Nevertheless, it seems likely that at Ballinderry no. 1, the centrally placed, circular house in the phase 2 (Hencken's 'primary crannog') occupation levels, an internal thin floor of clay was laid over a wattle screen on top of a brushwood layer.

At Ballinderry no. 2, the ninth-century crannog had been badly disturbed by nineteenth century diggings. But it appeared that a house in the southeast quadrant had a foundation deposit of oak and ash posts laid in a criss-cross fashion. Between these timbers were blocks of cut peat and brushwood, while the actual living surface or floor itself was a layer of ash, clay and charcoal, 7m across, 45cm in depth. Animal bones were profusely distributed through this 'floor'. At Lough Faughan, the possible circular house at 'Hearth

⁸¹ B.B. Williams, 'Excavations at Ballyutoag, County Antrim' in *U.J.A.*, 47, (1984), pp 37-49.

4' may have had multiple floor surfaces of at least seven layers of grey ash, yellow clay and charcoal.

More recent site excavations allow a more subtle interpretation of how house floors were laid and accumulated. At Sroove, the house floor of the phase 2 was composed of a thick (20cm) layer of brushwood, intermixed with clay. There were few animal bones on this floor, but the presence of grain, blackberries and raspberries suggest food preparation and consumption within the house, probably during the summer and autumn. There were a few finds from this floor level, including a flint thumb scraper and chert arrowhead found near the hearth. The floor of the next phase of occupation, phase 3, was entirely different. This was a floor of flagstones laid over a base of smaller stones, 2-3 layers thick. Finds from this floor level included a lignite bracelet, comb fragment (near the fireplace), and bone beads. Towards the back of the house there were iron nails, a small bone needle, a bone pin and a knife. Fredengren suggests that the presence of such objects argue that the house was 'alive' and not 'cleaned out'.

However, most early medieval dwelling surfaces would actually have been 'cleaned-out' periodically. It is apparent for example, from palaeoecological studies of house floors in Hiberno-Norse Dublin that the central house aisles were actually regularly swept out (leaving little for scientific analysis). In contrast, the benches and the spaces at the wall edges produced plenty of rotting vegetation, household debris, personal objects, and industrial waste (e.g. amber fragments, metal, etc) suggesting that they had fallen down into the interstices in the bedding at either side of the house.⁸²

Similarly, a mid-eighth century house within an early medieval ringfort at Deer Park Farms, Co. Antrim had a bed made of wooden beams, branches and twigs. This bed was the location of most of the small artefacts (including a glass bead and a fine bronze pin) found within the house, as they had been lost down between the interstices of the bed structure. Object scatters around a house floor can be used to reveal then the differential use of space within the darkness of the dwelling. It might be suggested instead that the finds from Sroove indicate the location of the bedding against the back of the house walls, and thence usefully the organisation of daily and nightly activity within the structure.

⁸² Siobhan Geraghty, *Viking Dublin: botanical evidence from Fishamble Street* (Dublin, 1996).

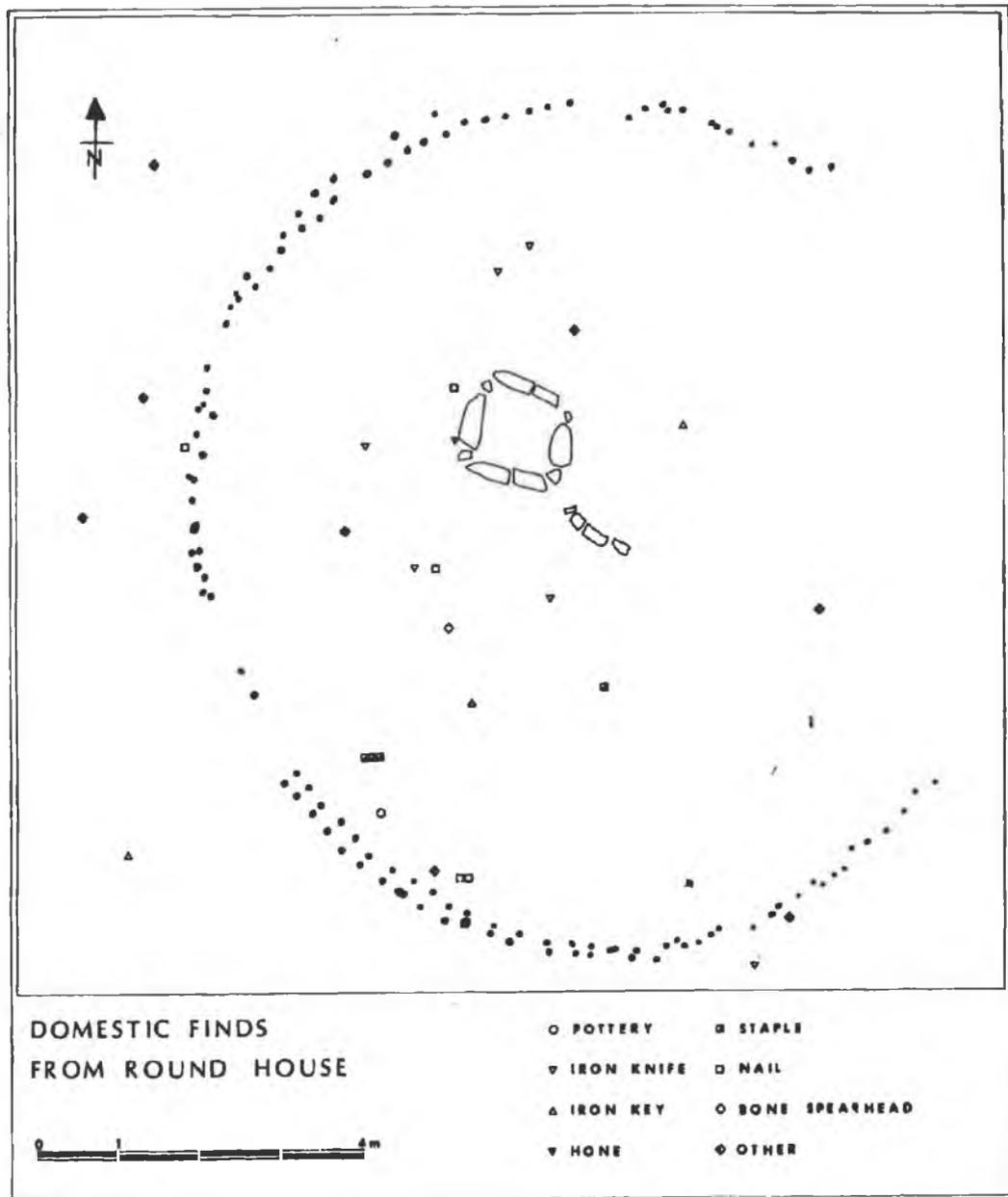


Fig. 7.12 Distribution of 'domestic finds' (e.g. pottery, whetstones, knives) within the Moynagh Lough house, indicating that such activity was predominantly carried out in the southern half of the house, a zone seemingly associated amongst many societies with daily, 'bright' or domestic life (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 22).

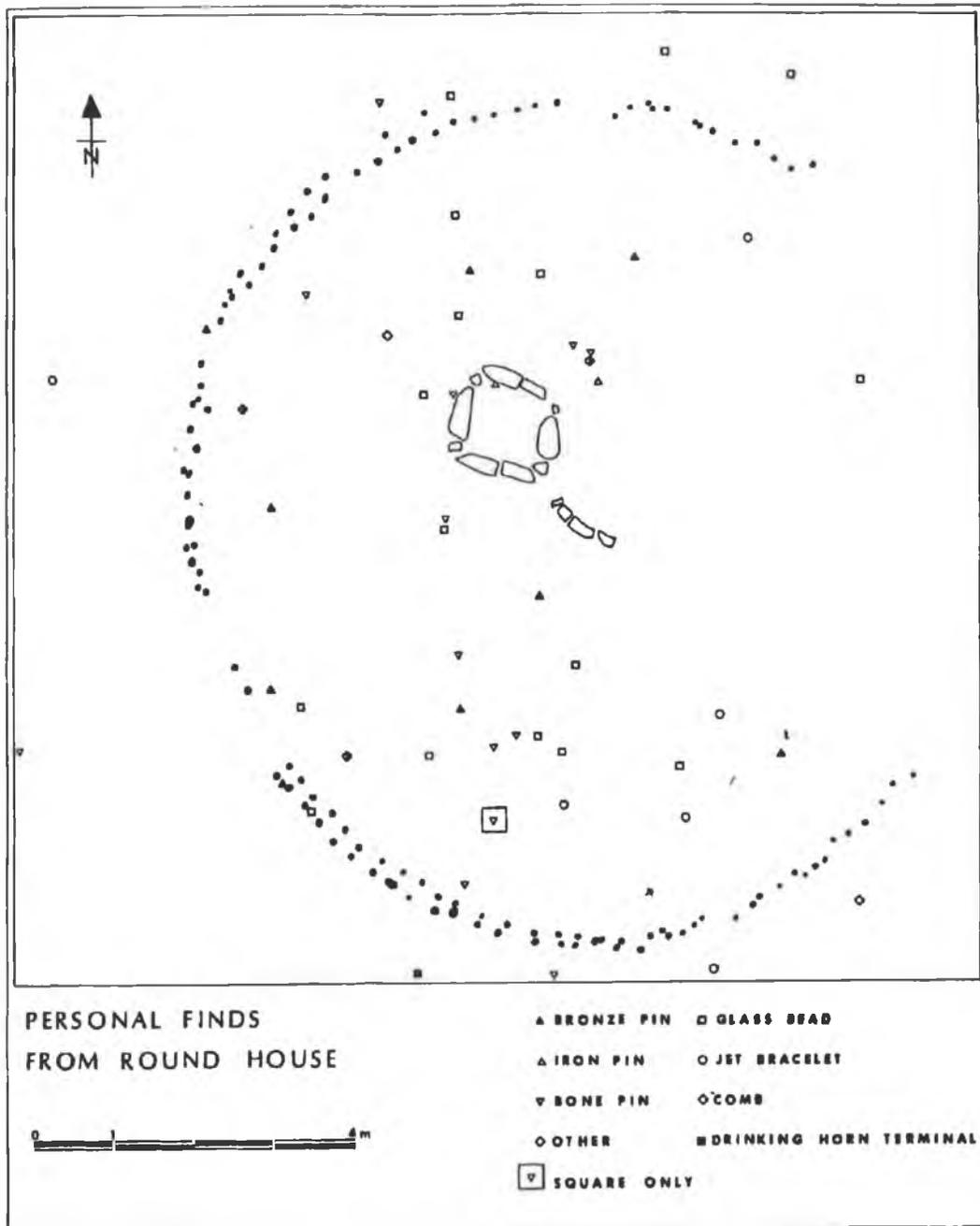


Fig 7.13 Distribution of 'personal objects' (e.g. bronze pins, bone pins, glass beads, comb, drinking horn terminal) with the Moynagh Lough house, indicating a slightly wider dispersal of objects, but still with a trend to the south. It is possible that the use of beds and benches there may have led to the occasional loss of personal items of adornment. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 25).

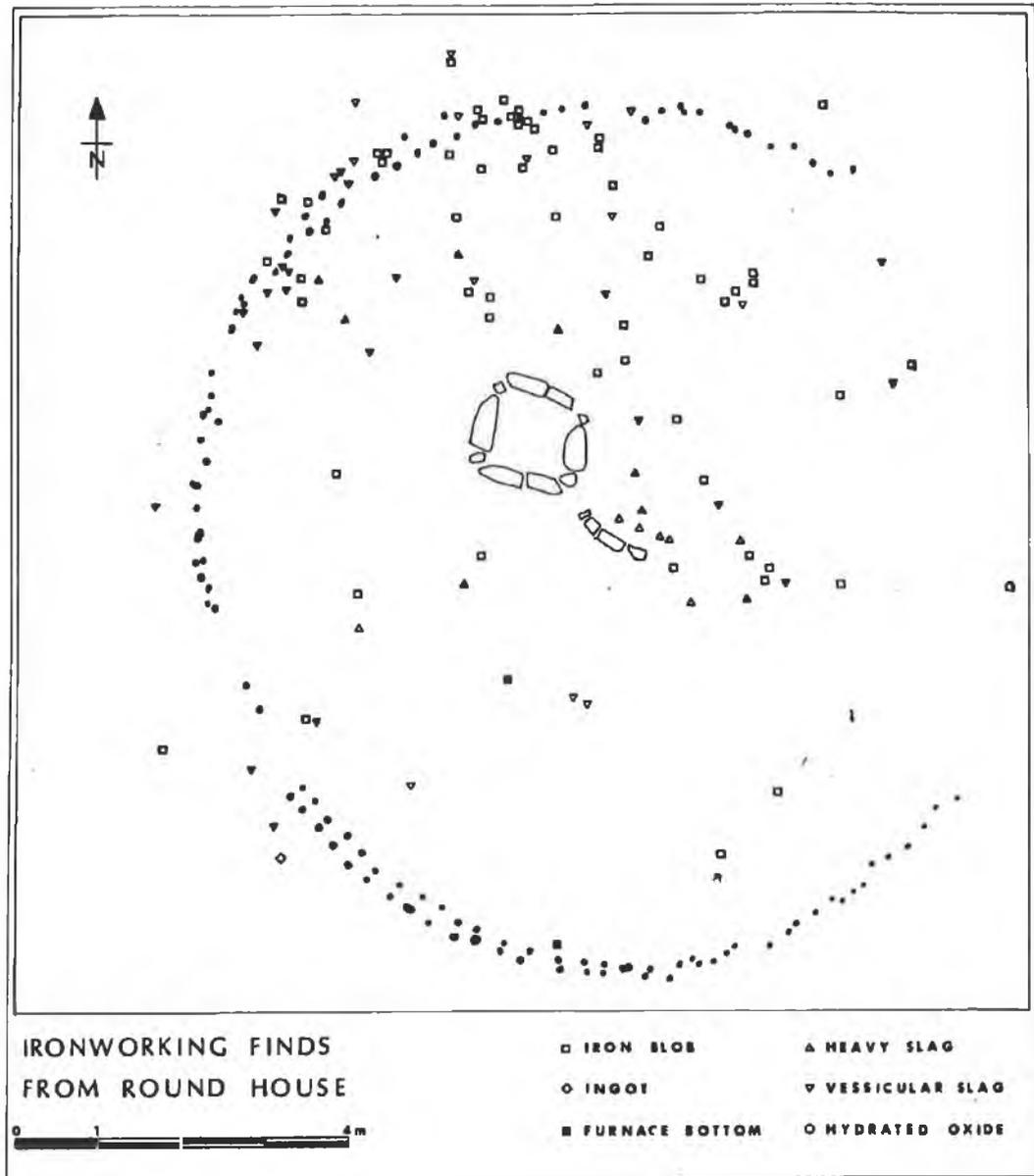


Fig. 7.14 Distribution of 'ironworking finds' (e.g. iron blobs, ingots, furnace bottoms, slag) within the Moynagh Lough house, indicating a striking emphasis on the northern half of the house. Amongst many societies, this is the dark half, associated with cold, night and wintertime. It is possible that ironworking waste, associated with danger and otherworldly forces, was consigned to this zone when the house floors were being relaid. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 24).

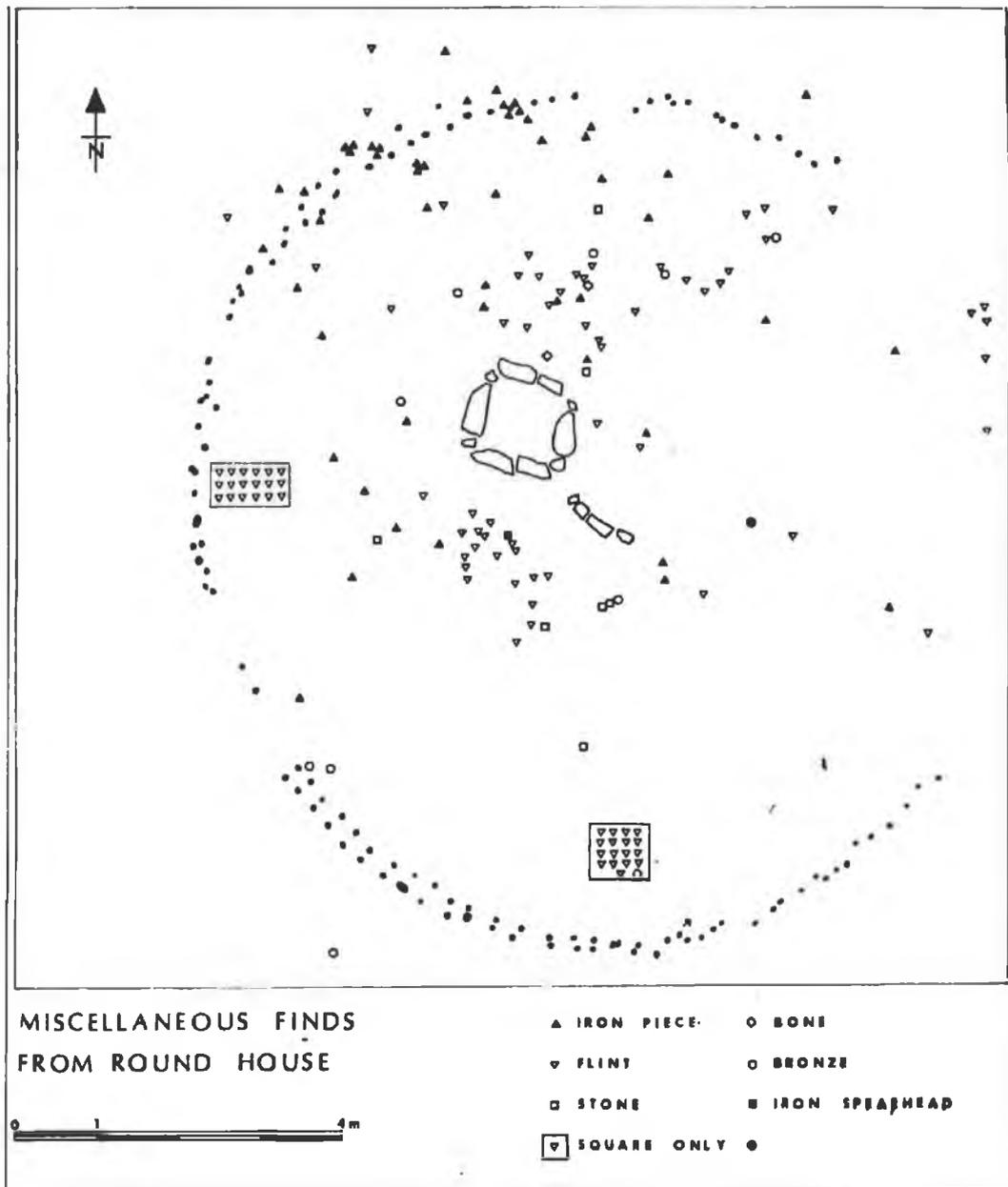


Fig. 7.15 Distribution of 'miscellaneous finds' (e.g. iron pieces, flint, stone and bone objects) within the Moynagh Lough house. The iron finds are again found in the north, while flint objects were typically found around the central hearth or fireplace. Being used to light fires, it would be natural for such objects to fall there. Perhaps, thereafter when people were re-lighting the fire they could search the floor around them for 'strike-a-lights'. Some flint objects (especially prehistoric arrowheads) may also have been considered as magical items, used for preserving food and protecting the house. (Source: J. Bradley, *Excavations at Moynagh Lough. 1980-84*, Fig. 23).

At Moynagh Lough, the large eighth-century roundhouse was constructed on a base of compacted reddish-brown gravel that had been dumped in a pennanular shape around the central hearth.⁸³ This gravel was laid directly on a platform of re-deposited peat and served as the foundation layers for the circles of posts that made up the walls of the house. The internal habitation floor itself was a silty clay-loam with ash and charcoal flecking. Although it was on average up to 12cm in thickness, it was thickest on the south side of the house and around the hearths and it was thinnest on the north side, where it had been trampled into the reddish-brown gravel floor.

This might suggest that it was the south side of the house that saw most daily activity and renewal, while the north side may have been largely covered by bedding, hides for the night. The floor surface at Moynagh Lough was rich in animal bones particularly around the hearth, and was also rich in finds around the edges of the house. This in itself would appear to indicate that most daily activity occurred at the house's centre and to the south towards the benches.

Most remarkably, the house floor and habitation layers at Moynagh Lough were remarkably rich in finds. The included many items associated with personal adornment (bronze pseudo-pennanular brooch, bronze pins, bone pins and iron pins, bronze finger rings, glass beads and bracelets), as well as objects associated with feasting and gaming (a bronze drinking horn terminal and a bone gaming piece). There were also iron knives, spindle whorls, stone hones and iron nails, perhaps all to be associated with daily crafts and industry within the dwelling, as well as some items of weaponry, including an iron spearhead and a bone point. Perhaps most remarkably, there were also fragments of moulds in the floor deposits. These various objects should be regarded as deliberate deposits. It might be suggested that a visitor to the house at Moynagh Lough could have seen the floor and drawn his own conclusions about the social status of the site's inhabitants.

The evidence from the distribution of finds across the house floor at Moynagh Lough is revealing. Bradley's excavations have revealed that at the Moynagh Lough roundhouse, the distribution of 'domestic finds' (e.g. pottery, whetstones, knives) and 'personal objects' (e.g. bronze pins, bone pins, glass beads, combs) suggest that day-to-day food preparation and basic domestic crafts typically occurred in the southern half of the house (Fig. 7.12; Fig. 7.13). In the Iron Age British household studies described above,

⁸³ Bradley, 'Excavations at Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath' (1991), pp 5-26 ; Bradley, Excavations at

similar patterns have been used to argue that the sunward (i.e. southern), 'bright' or 'warm' side of the roundhouse was conceptually the space for daily life and the domestic world. At Moynagh Lough, the iron working debris is located to the northern, 'dark' or 'moonlit' half, suggesting a symbolic and conceptual association with darkness, the 'night', the 'other' (Fig. 7.14). The smith being particularly an otherworldly of darkness and danger might tally with this. The northern half of the house may also have been the location for such 'night-time' activities as feasting, sleeping and so on.

In the Moynagh Lough house, the distribution of 'miscellaneous finds' (e.g. iron pieces, flint, stone objects) is again largely to the north, but the flint objects cluster around the hearth (Fig. 7.15). Some may have been strike-a-lights, but it is also possible that some were apotropaic objects (i.e. objects that turn away evil), designed to magically protect the household from fire, to protect milk products and to establish the 'antiqueness' of the house floor by use of mythical objects, such as blades, arrowheads and so on.⁸⁴ It should be admitted that these are quite structuralist interpretations, inspired by Iron Age studies in Britain that are now questioned by many scholars. Ironically, those same studies were actually themselves originally inspired by 'Celtic' mythology (i.e. actually early Irish literature), and early medieval Irish concepts of 'sunwise' movement in the pilgrimage *turas*. So either the above is a circular argument, or it properly makes use of early medieval Irish beliefs within an early medieval Irish roundhouse. In any case, it hints that the spatial organisation of early medieval roundhouses was understood in both social and ideological terms.

Although the Moynagh Lough house was not physically divided into rooms, it could be argued that its space would have been bounded by both seen features (i.e. the door, hearth, benches and bedding, as well as objects such as looms and cooking equipment) and unseen features (i.e. a person's inherited, and undiscussed awareness of customary and proper behaviour). Inside the large round house, a visitor would have immediately been in a public display space, between the hearth and the door, with choice of seating and beds to left and right. The most eminent members of the household may have sat beyond the hearth, probably at the west side. If invited, the visitor could then move in and sit on beds or seating areas. It is possible that the socially significant beds were those on the north side (or the right hand side), probably used by the man of the house, his wife and favoured guests or family. The southern (or left hand) beds or benches may

Moynagh Lough, Co. Meath 1980-1984, Unpublished site archive report (Dublin, 1984).

⁸⁴ Carelli, 'Thunder and lightning, magical miracles. On the popular myth of thunderbolts and the presence of Stone Age artefacts in Medieval deposits', pp 393-417; Evans, *Irish folkways*, pp 303-3.

have been used by strangers or lesser members of the household, those responsible for labour, domestic tasks and cooking.

It is possible to compare the structural details of the eighth-century Moynagh Lough roundhouse with the eighth-century law tract *Crith Gablach*. In this text, the houses of various individuals are described, from farmers, to lords and kings. It claims that the king's house (*ritheach*) must be thirty-seven feet (11.2m) in diameter, and that it must have seventeen bed-cubicles. It also suggests that there were significant links between spatial location and social identity, implying that status and rank were negotiated and expressed by the places where different people sat within a house.

How is a king's house arranged?. His house is thirty-seven feet (11.2m diameter). There are seventeen beds in a royal house...King's guards on the south side...a man for pledge for vassals next to these...next to him inwards, envoys. Next to these guest-companies. Poets next to these, harpers next. Flute-players, horn-players, jugglers in the south-east...a man of arms to guard the door. Next to these the free-clients of the lord. Hostages next to these. The judge next to these. His wife next to him. The king next. Forfeited hostages in fetters in the north-east.⁸⁵

Archaeologists and historians have occasionally attempted to map out the details in these descriptions and match them to archaeological sites, but it is worth remembering that these are probably imaginative works of literature, not descriptions of houses that existed in reality.⁸⁶ In fact, Bhreathnach has suggested that such literary descriptions are based not on Irish houses, but on rumours and traveller's tales of houses that had been seen in Anglo-Saxon England or Carolingian Europe.⁸⁷ However, they do signify that the organisation of house space in early medieval Ireland was something that was understood very much in terms of social identity. In the Old Irish text, *Lánellach tigi ríoch 7 ruirech* ('the full complement of the house of a king and overking'), there is an interesting description of the organisation of such space within a royal household.

Conchobar sat in the chief seat.
Goibne sat by his knee (i.e. the smiths seat is ..below the kings knee).
Forinde sat beside him (druids and seers between two compartments).
Tot mac Eogain Orbrecht sat in front (i.e. the judges were beside the king's throne).
Augune sat behind the king's (?) compartment.
The spearman (?) sat beside the houseposts.
The sureties (*hostages*) sat before the king (i.e. for the binding of every rightful claim).
Búanond sat in the level rush-strewn place (i.e. the ruling queen (?)).

⁸⁵ MacNeill, 'Ancient Irish law', pp 265-316.

⁸⁶ Hilary Murray, 'Documentary evidence for domestic buildings in Ireland, c400-1200 in the light of archaeology' in *Med. Arch.* 23 (1979), pp 81-97.

⁸⁷ Edel Bhreathnach, 'The tech midchúarta, 'the house of the mead circuit': feasting, royal circuits and the king's court in early Ireland' in *Arch. Ire.* 46, (1998), pp 20-22.

The hospitallers sat by the bounteous king's forearms (i.e. under the king's control to minister before him (?).

The [] and the leeches (?) sat with the drink-measure beside the cupbearers.

The leather-bottle makers [and] the brewers sat on the great threshing floor (i.e. on the floor of the house where is the din of distribution).

The jesters and the [] sat between the two candlesticks on the front floor of the house.

Other *daernemed* persons sat by the door-posts (i.e. (those) with special powers and with satire and buffooning tricks).

The horn-blowers, charioteers and flute-players sat in the front part (of the house).

The attendants took up position before the pillars, (i.e. on the pillars of the dais) sitting and standing.

The hunters, fishermen, trappers and fence-makers sat in a cubicle apart (i.e. amongst the vessels, in the company of the attendants and the cooks, etc).⁸⁸

From the archaeological and historical evidence, one could interpret the Moynagh Lough house at least as a feasting house (*tech midchúarta*, 'house of the mead circuit') in which the texts tell us there was bouts of feasting and mead drinking, all of which was presided over by a noble. The Moynagh Lough house was certainly a high-status dwelling of a significant individual or social group, and it may well have been a king's house (*rí theach*). Bhreathnach's historical research suggests that Moynagh Lough can be identified as a place known as *Loch Dé Mundeach* so that its crannog may well have been a 'royal site' of the *Mugdorne*.⁸⁹

So, it is worth remembering then that early medieval house floors effectively mapped out what people did within dwellings and then revealed this to others. The floor would have tended to be amongst the more visible of a house's various structural features, particularly when the sunlight shone in the door or when a fire was burning on the hearth. The floor's textures and contours could have been both seen and felt underfoot. Pathways would have been beaten into its surface by constant passage around the hearth and to the door, signifying the 'proper' way to move around the dwelling. The house floor also presented to view those objects left from previous events or activities carried out within the house. For example, broken moulds could have reminded the visitor of a previous night when gifts of brooches had been given by a lord to his clients, while animal bones and pieces of discarded food on the floor testified to the fineness of the meats that had been eaten there.

At Moynagh Lough, although there were large numbers of finds from within the house floor, most of the bones were congregated around the hearth. Similarly, at Ballinderry no. 1, around the hearth of the eleventh century roundhouse 'were found the bones of

⁸⁸ Máirín O'Daly, 'Lánellach tigi rích 7 ruirech' in *Ériu* 19 (1962), pp 81-6.

⁸⁹ Bhreathnach, 'Topographical note: Moynagh Lough', pp 16-19.

many animals, mostly domestic, and though there were found in great profusion in nearly every part of the site, they were especially plentiful there'.⁹⁰ Even these simple deposits of bone may have served as simple relics of the past. In modern society, the remnants of parties are cleaned up and all traces removed. In early medieval houses, animal bones may actually have been deliberately left around hearths to remind people of past events, feasts, meals and successful carousing.

Hearths and fireplaces: symbols of the household

Hearths and fireplaces can be clearly identified within many of the crannog houses (e.g. Moynagh Lough, Sroove, Craigywarren, Ballinderry no. 2, Ballinderry no. 1). Some are only defined by a roughly circular area of ash, burnt clay and charcoal, often apparently at the centre of the house. However, even these simple hearths often have multiple layers of ash and clay, indicating long-term use and build-up. Occasionally, these undefined hearths are placed across a single level stone. At Sroove, in Phase 2 the central hearth within the house was on a single fire-reddened stone. The same place in the house was re-used as a hearth in Phase 3.

At Ballinderry no. 2, a remarkable, massive cracked circular millstone (probably re-used from an abandoned horizontal mill that had been used somewhere in the surrounding landscape) was onto the site and laid down as a hearth-stone on a foundation of small stones within a possible house floor of timber and ash. The stone was left within the fire so that it was gradually buried layers of ash. At Ballinderry no. 1, the various possible houses from the tenth to the eleventh century AD produced several hearths. In the pre-crannog occupation levels, two superimposed hearths were found on the floor of a rectangular building. In the late eleventh century levels, both House II and House III produced hearths that seemed to have developed across time.

On other crannog houses, hearths are more formally defined, being rectangular boxes edged and lined with stones. At Craigywarren, a stone-lined hearth beside the hut and midden was defined by a single flat stone, but was surrounded by smaller stones, covered with ashes. These built or defined hearths were also frequently re-built on top of each other, perhaps over significantly long periods of time. At Moynagh Lough, in the two roundhouses in Phase Y, the hearths were built of stones set on edge to create a rectangle or square. The same hearths were clearly re-used, but shifted slightly in location within the house and changed slightly in shape. In the large eighth-century roundhouse, the first

⁹⁰ Hencken, 'Ballinderry no. 1', p. 117.

fireplace was an open hearth into which a second rectangular, stone-lined pit was placed. Subsequently, a third fireplace was added to the east. There was also evidence for periodic rake-outs from this main hearth, with twenty discrete spreads of ash taken out from the fire and spread across the house floor.

Hearths would have been of huge symbolic and social importance to the household on a crannog, being literally the centre of the dwelling and the focus of most domestic and social activity within it. They served as the hub for various events, both cooking, crafts and social interaction, and their existence confirms, if it were needed, that these crannogs were indeed habitations, places where people lived. Hearths are also interesting in that they become permanent fixtures or settings, in that they hearken back to the past, while their re-building signals an intention that they be used again in the future. The evidence from crannogs suggests that they became historical settings, acting as symbols of the household's genealogical past and a link to earlier and future generations.

Conclusions

This chapter, after previous studies of landscapes and the architecture of crannogs, finally moved into them. It explored how social relationships of power, gender and kinship were negotiated within the boundaries of these islands. It also suggested that powerfully liminal features, such as middens, might have been used in socially and ideologically interesting ways. It also discussed the role of houses, and how people may have understood and used them in the daily lives, both for the practicalities of crafts and food preparation, but also to build an understanding of the world. In the next chapter, the thesis is concluded.

Chapter 8

Conclusions

The aims and objectives of this thesis, as described in the introduction chapter, were to a) review previous research on the history and archaeology of early medieval crannogs in Ireland, to b) explore and reconstruct the social and ideological role of crannogs in early Middle Ages and to c) investigate this through a series of original landscape, local and site-oriented studies in Westmeath, along with interpretations of early medieval crannogs from other regions and localities.

In the past, scholars have built up a storehouse of knowledge about crannogs in Ireland, usually interpreting them according to the social, political and cultural agendas of their times. In the early nineteenth century, they were forgotten places in the Irish landscape, although some memories of them remained in the northwest to be collected by the surveyors with the Ordnance Survey in the 1830s. In the early nineteenth century, as lakes and wetlands were drained during landscape improvement projects, they began to be recognised as distinct, if enigmatic places. Initially, local labourers dug into these mounds to collect bones for fertiliser, discarding other finds, but they were soon followed by antiquities traders and gentleman scholars.

The indefatigable work of scholars like Wood-Martin, Wakeman and Wilde led to them becoming romantic symbols of a bygone age, from an era when people inhabited wetlands rather than avoided them. Between the 1930s and the 1950s, crannogs were used by the Free State and the Northern Ireland government as symbols of the past. In the republic, they were used to hearken back to a pure, Christian and Gaelic past, while in the north, archaeologists primarily aimed to establish their role in the late medieval landscape (i.e. after the Anglo-Norman invasion). In the 1980s, local people again began to dig into crannogs, as metal detectors and sub-aqua equipment became easily available. The state responded with legislation and by establishing their own archaeological surveys, particularly those of the Crannog Archaeological Project. In recent decades, the development of wetland archaeology worldwide and the investigation of multi-period sites like Moynagh Lough have greatly influenced the interpretation of these places.

This thesis also sits within its own tradition of scholarship, influenced by postprocessual archaeology and a growing interest in the interpretation of past landscapes in social, ideological, symbolic and economic terms. It argues that that such landscapes were not

merely sources of economic benefit, but were also storehouses of cultural values and traditions, being used to shape and order society. The thesis is also arguably shaped by modern debates about social identity, the role of boundaries and marginality and the endeavour to restore the voices of people outside history.

Early Irish saints' lives, annals and sagas project an image of islands as places apart, distant and enigmatic, located in liminal spaces, between land and water, between this world and the otherworld. By travelling to these islands, by living upon them, the community's heroes, whether they were clerics, kings, nobles or other people, had the ability to confront and negotiate phenomena, monsters and women, usually to the benefit of the community. While these stories are literary in style, often works of the imagination, they were rooted in contemporary society, born of it and seeking to shape it. In other words, these early medieval documents were themselves artefacts with their own ideological agendas and intentions. They sought (and their authors sought) to construct and order society according to the beliefs of contemporary social elites.

Indeed, archaeological studies reveal the social and ideological role of early medieval crannogs. This study has shown how some were used as places where social hierarchies and power relationships could be established, maintained and supported. Both kings (such as the southern Uí Néill kings of the Clann Chólmáin at Cróinis, or the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair on Lough Derravarragh) and saints (on their monastic islands and island hermitages in the midland lakes and the Atlantic maritime provinces) resided on islands. They used these distant islands as places to control social encounters, manipulate social identities and to demand and receive loyalty from the surrounding population. Other social classes also had their own social and ideological uses of crannogs too. The lower nobility used them as places to defend territories and land, to control movement and travel. The 'middle classes' of farmers and skilled craftsmen (particularly smiths), the landless tenants of both lordly and ecclesiastical estates, the poor and the socially marginalised all built, lived on and used islands as well, placing themselves apart and inhabiting places they could control.

Landscape archaeological studies in the north midland lakelands of Westmeath have enabled a reconstruction of the social and ideological role of crannogs in the early Middle Ages. In the early medieval kingdom of Mide, it is possible to show that crannogs were often located on the boundaries of the túath. For instance, this is the case at Lough Derravarragh, where both the crannogs of the wealthy and the powerful and the landless poor were located on the probable territorial boundary between the early medieval

population groups of Uí Maccu Uais Mide, the Corco Roíde and the Uí Fiachrach Cúile Fobair. It is also true of crannogs on Lough Ennell, where the crannogs lie on the territorial boundaries between the Clann Chólmáin and the Fir Tulach (albeit that the former were the most powerful dynasty in the region). It is also notable that significant early medieval crannogs such as Clonickilvant, Lough-a-Trim, Newtownlow and Ballinderry No. 1 are all located on or close to probable early medieval túath boundaries.

However, instead of interpreting early medieval crannogs as places located in peripheral or marginal landscapes, it should be recognised that territorial (and other) boundaries were of symbolic and social importance in early medieval Ireland. These were locations where early medieval population groups could interact peacefully, such as at fairs and public assemblies, or where they could exchange goods, political tribute, marriage partners, or negotiate political and strategic agreements. On the other hand, they were also places where communities could interact less peacefully, with hostings and raids across 'tribal' boundaries. This is clear in the early medieval annals that describe raids between Tethbae, Mide, Brega and Connacht, when there was often a deliberate strategy of going out onto lakes to destroy islands and crannogs. It is evident that some crannogs were defensive and aggressive, placed on boundaries of water to monitor activity and to project power across territorial borders.

It is also true that early medieval crannogs were located on significant routeways, whether they were close to esker roadways or watery, navigable routeways such as the River Inny, the River Brosna and the River Adeel. It is also evident that crannogs were not in marginal or 'peripheral' areas in terms of agriculture and economy. Landscape archaeological analyses in Westmeath reveal that most crannogs were located next to, or as close as possible to, good agricultural land (in terms of soils, slopes, aspect and drainage). Although they were situated in wetlands, it was not fish and fowl that people were interested in, but cattle pasture and soils suitable for ploughing and sowing crops, as might be expected from an agricultural, rural society. Indeed, this emphasises the importance of exploring early medieval crannogs in relation to their surrounding landscapes. This study's regional and local investigations also reveal the significant role that crannogs played in relation to local settlement. Although they are often separated from the densest distribution of early medieval ringforts in the region, they do establish a presence in places of social and ideological importance (particularly in terms of political territories). In fact, there is an interesting correlation between some early medieval crannogs, churches and holy wells, arguing a potential use of these islands by the church. This could have been partly symbolic and ideological, as the hagiographies

and voyage tales suggest that the saint often triumphed over pagan monsters in water, emerging therefore as the protector of the community. It is also known that early medieval churches were often granted lands at the 'edge' of the territory, so crannogs may well have been granted to the church in a similar way and some early medieval crannogs might even have been used as island hermitages and shrine islands.

In this thesis, some 'scenarios' were sketched out to explore these patterns in local contexts. For instance, at the early medieval crannogs of Cróinis (Lough Ennell) and Coolure Demesne 1 (Lough Derravarragh), it is possible to show that these islands while seeming remote, distant and enigmatic, are in fact highly visible, imposing and dramatic. In the early Middle Ages, the king was at the centre of society, so his crannog was central as well. Around him on his island was his household, his stewards, poets and retainers, his metalworkers and warriors. Around them on the lakeshore were his nobles, tenants and labourers, all able to view the king out on his island and to express loyalty to him, to identify with this place and this community. The early medieval crannogs was a 'stage' for the performance of 'social identities' in the theatre of the social and ideological landscape. On the other hand, some early medieval crannogs were used by lower social classes, such as the poor and the labouring tenants of both secular and ecclesiastical estates. Occasionally, these small, low crannogs are situated in shallow water and are distributed together around a small bay or along a stretch of lakeshore, suggesting that particular social groups were actually living together at isolated lake edges. This may be unique evidence for the nucleated settlements of poor and landless in the early Middle Ages.

The physical architecture of early medieval crannogs was also used in social and ideological relationships. This is evident from the results of my archaeological surveys in Westmeath, interpreted with reference to surveys and excavations in other regions and localities. Historical sources and archaeological evidence offer new interpretations of the practicalities of building a crannog and what it might have meant to the community. The thesis also explains how crannogs may have been re-occupied, altered, re-built and abandoned across time. Indeed, dynamism and change was normal on an early medieval crannog, with all its slumping, waterlogging and exposure to the effects of wind, waves and time. Re-building crannogs, erecting new palisades, returning to them over time, all reflects an interest in the re-activation of places that had been damaged in storms or abandoned for years. There is much that is lost to us here. We can never know about the actual historical events (raids, storm destruction, accidental burnings, and deaths) or the political history that shaped the biography of an island. But it is possible to trace the

potential social and ideological role of that site's biography. This study suggested some social explanations for the siting, remoteness, depth of water, size, shape and appearance of crannogs, for the practical and visual impact of their edges, for the use of causeways and boats to control and enable movement of people to them.

The social organisation of space within early medieval crannogs can be explained in terms of social hierarchy, role and status, gender and household relations, as well as the social role of labour and work within the community. Islands were intensely bounded and enclosed spaces, the stages for community and kin-based life. These crannogs were actually created by people's daily lives, practices and habitual activities, reflecting how they understood these islands in social and cultural terms. However, crannogs themselves also structured and ordered how people used domestic space, worked and lived with each other in close proximity, interacting in various social ways. This can be traced archaeologically by the study of entrances, floors, pits, hearths and open-air metalworking surfaces, by the liminal location, physical appearance and symbolic contents of middens, with their bones, food debris and discarded artefacts. Within the boundaries of the island, there was also the social and ideological understanding of the house itself. Houses were significant locations for social activities, from the rhythms of domestic work and crafts to the ceremonial performance of hospitality and feasts. People used doorways, floors, hearths and internal spaces to establish a link with the past, to identify with the social group and to build an understanding of the world.

Time, tradition, memory and the past were clearly of significance to people in the early Middle Ages. Interestingly, although there is evidence for Late Bronze Age activity on many crannogs around Ireland, this is not at all clear in Westmeath. Despite the fact that Late Bronze Age lake dwellings are known in the midlands, such as at Clonfinlough and Ballinderry No. 2, Co. Offaly, there is little palaeoecological, scientific dating or artefactual evidence for activity on Westmeath's crannogs in later prehistory (although further studies may alter this picture). Instead, the archaeological evidence suggests that crannogs really begin to be built, occupied and used there at the beginning of the early medieval period, probably in the sixth to seventh centuries AD. Indeed, it is possible that significant political developments in the region in the fifth to sixth century were the originator of this, as earlier tribal groups were being dominated and moved on by the emerging dynasties of the southern Uí Néill. Although political explanations are currently unfashionable in archaeological interpretation, it is difficult to ignore the historical evidence for dynastic struggles, conflict between population groups and the endemic violence and warfare of these years. It is also difficult to avoid the conclusion

that there may have been actual movement of Irish population groups across the north midlands, contemporary with 'barbarian migrations' in early medieval Europe. It is even possible to speculate that landscapes that had been abandoned during the Iron Age, particularly lakelands, woodlands, and the wetland edges of bogs and fens, were being settled by marginalised population groups (descended from earlier, displaced 'tribal groups') that were now moving into them. Were they using early medieval crannogs to establish roots in an empty landscape? At the same time, other more powerful population groups may have been using islands to place themselves in landscapes of particular social and ideological power (boundary waters, lakes with monsters in them, and so on).

Thereafter, while there is evidence for activity through the early Middle Ages, it is in the ninth and tenth century (interestingly, at a time when the saints lives, voyage tales and adventure tales emphasise the role of islands as significant places) that there is most archaeological evidence for the use and occupation of crannogs in Westmeath. Bronze ringed pins, silver ingots, hack silver and coins from Hiberno-Norse Dublin have been found on crannogs across Westmeath, probably representing the distribution through Mide of objects collected as political tribute, loot or plunder by the Clann Chólmáin and others. This is the also the period of significant social and ideological change in Ireland (i.e. the emergence of lordships and a 'semi-feudal' society) and the consolidation of the power of the population groups of the kingdom of Mide. It is possible that some early medieval ringforts and crannogs on Westmeath's lakeshores developed as nucleated settlements, with populations gathering around lordly dwellings (such as raised ringforts and massive, high-cairn crannogs). This could be an explanation for the concentrations of numerous small low-cairn crannogs and platforms around the ninth and tenth century crannogs at Coolure Demesne, Cróinis, Goose Island, Cherry Island, amongst others. If it is, then here is archaeological evidence for the significant social and ideological changes in the settlement landscape that have been proposed by historians and not yet found by archaeologists.

Finally, perhaps nothing reveals the ideological and cultural significance of crannogs to the early medieval Irish, as the leaving of them. In Westmeath, after the Anglo-Norman invasion, the colonisation of the region and the profound ethnic and political changes of the period, its crannogs are abandoned. While they continued to be built, re-activated and used in Gaelic lordships of the northwest, in the midlands they were abandoned, overgrown and slowly forgotten through the late Middle Ages. On occasion, some places redolent of the past, such as Newtownlow crannog were appropriated by new Anglo-

Norman colonists, while Cróinis may have been re-occupied after the resurgence of the midlands Gaelic lordships, but generally they were no longer considered as appropriate dwelling places. Political and ethnic changes had removed the social, cultural and ideological contexts of their use. Thereafter, they slipped out of the local consciousness (as indicated by the general lack of local folklore about these crannogs in Westmeath), until nineteenth-century antiquarians like William Wilde visited Lough Derravarragh, or until Bardan and Falkiner collected finds from Lough-a-Trim and Clonickilvant crannogs, thus beginning to recreate memories of them.

This thesis has shown that multidisciplinary studies (using archaeology, history, palaeoenvironmental studies) of early medieval crannogs, particularly when informed by recent thinking in anthropology and sociology, bears exciting and fruitful results. It has also demonstrated that the study of early medieval crannogs provides interesting commentary on the nature of social identity, on the role of ideology, cultural values and symbolic beliefs in society and on how economic practices were embedded in social relationships in early medieval Ireland. Such work enables new insights into society in the early Middle Ages, both in Ireland and abroad. What is the potential then for future research? Obviously, there is the potential for exploring the archaeology of Westmeath's crannogs in more detail. It would be desirable for the Lough Derravarragh sites to be scientifically dated and perhaps excavated, to test ideas about their chronology, history and use. Future landscape studies can explore the social and ideological role of early medieval crannogs in other regions, such as the drumlin lakelands, the northwest and the west (see Table 6.2 for the range of dated, but unexplored early medieval crannogs). In addition, some long-familiar crannogs, such as the classic, well-known early medieval sites of Lagore, Craigywarren and Lough Faughan, could be returned to, to explore further how they were understood and used within their regions and localities. Although Irish crannogs have been explored by antiquarians, archaeologists and local people for almost two hundred years, they remain an enigmatic and fascinating aspect of Ireland's past. Scholars have not written the last word.