

Appendix C17.03

Overview of the archaeological and historical development of the Study Area

GENERAL OVERVIEW OF THE IRISH ARCHAEOLOGICAL RECORD

Detailed below is a brief contextual overview of the main periods in the Irish archaeological record. It is important to note that settlements constructed during the prehistoric period and much of the medieval era also retained timber-built structures, that often do not leave any above ground traces or surface expression today. However, sub-surface, unrecorded remains of structure foundations and associated features and finds are often uncovered during earth-moving/ground reduction works. In addition, various domestic and ritual archaeological sites, dating from prehistory onwards, often had associated earthworks that have since been levelled (with little or no surface expression) in recent centuries by modern land improvement works. Nonetheless, the survival of sub-surface remains is still likely at both recorded and hitherto unrecorded archaeological site and monument locations.

Prehistoric Period

Until the recent identification of Palaeolithic human butchery marks on a bear bone recovered from a cave site in County Clare,¹ the earliest recorded evidence for human activity in Ireland dated to the Mesolithic period (7000 BC – 4000 BC) when groups of hunter-gatherers lived on the heavily wooded island. The archaeological record indicates that these nomadic groups tended to favour coastal, lake and river shorelines which provided a transport resource as well as a source for elements of their varied diet. There are no extant above-ground monuments dating to this period; however, the presence of Mesolithic sites can often be identified by scatters of worked lithics in ploughed fields, shoreline shell middens and traces of temporary occupation sites occasionally uncovered during modern ground works.

The Neolithic period (4000 BC - 2400 BC) began with the arrival and establishment of agriculture as the principal form of economic subsistence, which resulted in more permanent settlements within farmlands created in areas of cleared forestry. As a consequence of the more settled nature of agrarian life, new site-types, such as substantial rectangular timber houses and various types of megalithic tombs, and new artefacts, including pottery, begin to appear in the archaeological record during this period.

Late Prehistoric Period

Metalworking arrived in Ireland with the advent of the Bronze Age period (c. 2400 BC– 500 BC) and saw the introduction of a new artefactual assemblage, including metal and ceramic objects, to the island. This period was also associated with the construction of new monument types such as standing stones, stone rows, stone circles and burnt mounds and/or *fulachta fiadh*. The development of new burial practices during this period also saw the construction of funerary monuments such as cairns, barrows, boulder burials and cists.

The arrival of iron-working technology in Ireland saw the advent of the Iron Age (600 BC – 400 AD). This period has traditionally been associated with a Celtic 'invasion' but recent archaeological evidence points instead to a gradual acculturation of the Irish Bronze Age communities following centuries of contacts with Celtic-type cultures in Europe. Relatively little was known about Iron Age settlement and ritual practices in Ireland until recent decades when the corpus of evidence has been greatly increased by the discovery of sub-surface sites dating to this period during archaeological investigations in advance of development-led projects.

Early Medieval Period

This period began with the introduction of Christianity in Ireland and continued up to the arrival of the Anglo-Normans during the 12th-century (c. 400 AD – 1169 AD). The establishment of the Irish church was to have profound implications for political, social and economic life and is attested to in the archaeological record by the presence of church sites, associated places for burial and holy wells. The early medieval church sites were morphologically similar to ringforts but are often differentiated by the presence of features such as church buildings, graves, stone crosses and shrines.

¹ Dowd, M. & Carden, R.F. 2016. First Evidence of a Late Upper Palaeolithic human presence in Ireland. *Quaternary Science Reviews*. 139. 158-163.

This period saw the emergence of the first phases of urbanisation around the large monasteries and the Hiberno-Norse ports. However, the dominant settlement pattern of the period continued to be rural-based in sites such as ringforts, which comprise roughly circular enclosures delimited by roughly circular earthen banks formed of material thrown up from a concentric external ditch. Ringforts are one of the most numerous monuments in the Irish landscape and the early medieval terms for these sites – *rath*, *lios*, or *dún* still form some of the most common place-name elements in the country. Archaeological excavations indicate that the majority comprised enclosed farmsteads with internal timber buildings and were surrounded by associated field systems, stockades, barns, mills and drying-kilns.

High and Late Medieval Periods

The arrival and conquest of large parts of Ireland by the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th century broadly marks the advent of the Irish high medieval period which continued to c.1400 and was followed by the late medieval period which extended to c.1550. These periods saw the continuing expansion of Irish urbanisation as many of the port cities developed into international trading centres and numerous villages and towns began to develop throughout the country. By the 15th century the native Irish chieftains and lords began to construct tower houses as fortified residences within their landholdings.

Post-Medieval and Modern Periods

The centuries following 1550 are referred to as the post-medieval period, which is generally considered to continue into the mid-19th century and the period thereafter is described as early modern.

The early part of the post-medieval period was a turbulent time in Irish history and in the later decades of the 16th century the Tudors began to re-assert English control. The resultant wars between the 1560s and 1603 brought this unsettled period to a temporary end although further widespread strife ensued during the Cromwellian Wars which ended with extensive dispossession of forfeited Gaelic lands. The Down Survey was compiled during the 17th century as part of the Cromwellian Plantation and records townland and plantation acres at that time.

An agricultural boom in the late 18th and early 19th centuries saw a rise in prices for both tillage and dairy produce which resulted in landlords investing in extensive land improvement works within their holdings to increase land productivity. This included extensive enclosure of open lands into bounded field systems many of which survive to the present-day. The post-medieval period saw the development of high and low status stone houses throughout the Irish countryside and rural settlement clusters at this time typically consisted of single-storey thatched cottages with associated farm buildings while two-storey farmhouses became more common in the 19th century. The settlement pattern throughout much of the rural landscape was greatly affected by the famine period in the middle of the 19th century. The Griffith's Valuation (1847-1864) was the first full-scale valuation of property in Ireland and is an important surviving 19th century genealogical and cartographic resource.

Section 1 Overview

The Section 1 study area, north of Ballybofey-Stranorlar, has a long history of human settlement, as demonstrated by the archaeological and historical record. The River Finn has excellent fishing resources, and this fertile river valley, with gently undulating hillslopes, coupled with the fact that the river is navigable towards the River Foyle and Lough Foyle, ultimately out to sea, indicates that it was an important natural resource in social, economic and political terms since earliest prehistoric times.

The study area incorporates the town of Ballybofey on the southern bank of the river Finn which is connected by a bridge to Stranorlar on the northern bank, forming an area commonly known as the 'Twin Towns'. The general area was settled by the English during the Plantation of Ulster, and by 1622 a village of twelve houses and cottages were in existence at Ballybofey while Stranorlar comprised a village of ten houses and cottages (Hunter 1995). A portion of Drumboe demesne, (associated with Drumboe Castle RMP DG078-014- ---) is located within the study area close to the northern bank of the river Finn on the periphery of present day Ballybofey. Although it is uncertain whether the structure pre-dates 1700, an estate was in existence there by 1622. The castle became the Donegal General Headquarters for the Irish Free State forces during the Irish Civil War of 1922-23 and was the location of the execution of the 'Drumboe Martyrs', four Anti-Treaty Republicans shot by firing squad by order of the Irish Free State.

The settlements at Ballybofey and Stranorlar continued to develop during the 19th century mainly due to the growth of the linen industry in the region. *The Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (Lewis 1837) records that in the 1830s Ballybofey contained 168 houses and 874 inhabitants while Stranorlar had a population of 641 and contained 116 houses (Lewis 1837). The 19th century saw the connection of Stranorlar to the railway network when a standard gauge line extended from the town to a junction with the *Londonderry & Enniskillen Railway* (1863-1960) at Strabane. The Stranorlar railway station was in operation between 1863 and 1960 and was subsequently demolished to make way for a new bus station.

Section 2 Overview

The Section 2 study area, at the outer urban environs of Letterkenny and existing along the existing N13 dual carriageway to Manorcunningham, does not contain any recorded Mesolithic or Neolithic sites, although a number of flint artefacts have been recovered from the banks and shores of the Swilly. A cluster of recorded (but unlocated) examples of rock art at Trimnagh townland may also date to the Bronze Age period although the potential that they may date to the Neolithic period cannot be discounted.

A levelled ringfort site (DG053-026---) in Ballyrairie townland, which is recorded on the 1st edition OS map as 'White fort', is the only recorded example of an early medieval settlement site within this study area. The former presence of a church and graveyard site (DG053-028---- / DG053-028001-) in Trimnagh townland are also indicative of early ecclesiastical activity within the study area. While there is not an abundance of recorded early medieval sites within the Study Area, it is likely that the lands in this area were widely settled at this time.

The wider study area contains the recorded location of the 1587 Battle of Farsetmore which was fought between the O'Neill and O'Donnell armies (DG053-056----), with the fording point on the River Swilly below being highly contested focal point between the two camps.

The origins of Letterkenny town date to the early 17th century when 1,000 acres of land in the area were granted to a Scotsman, Patrick Crawford, who developed a settlement of fifty residences and one watermill (Treadwell 1954, 41). Sir Ralph Bingley also established a residence and associated settlement in Farsetmore townland and the village possibly in Dromore Lower (Hunter 1995). In 1650 a battle was fought at Scariffholis (The Ford of Light), on the outskirts of Letterkenny, between the English Parliamentary Forces, led by Sir Charles Coote, and the Irish Catholic Ulster Army, led by Bishop Herber McMahon. The battle resulted in the destruction of the Ulster Army, and the loss of most of its weapons and supplies. Over 3,000 Irish soldiers died, and it was a major blow to the Irish armed resistance to the Cromwellian Conquest of Ireland. Despite the unrest, Letterkenny continued to develop during the 18th and 19th centuries when it expanded from a small village into a prosperous town. *The Topographical Dictionary of Ireland* (Lewis 1837) recorded that in the 1830's the town consisted of one street with a spacious market-square, containing 416 houses with a weekly market and four fairs per year. In 1860 the Letterkenny Railway Company was incorporated by an act of Parliament. The existing N13 road carriageway is aligned atop a section of the former railway line, in the townland of Trimnagh with portions of the line still visible on aerial photographs within the townland of Magheraboy.

Section 3 Overview

The section 3 study area contains a number of predominantly prehistoric sites however a large majority of the recorded archaeological sites have been noted by the ASI as having no visible trace, which may attest to the impact of more intensive agricultural practices and land improvement works during the 20th century. Despite this, the environment is one of rich riverine lowlands and rolling drumlin terrain of excellent quality lands and soils. As such, there is high potential for the survival of sub-surface archaeological features, deposits and artefacts at such locations as well as within the wider greenfield environs.

The study area contains a number of important river networks, including the Corkey River at Manorcunningham; the Swilly Burn at Mullnaveagh; the River Deelee at Tyleford, and the River Finn at Lifford as well as the confluence of the Deelee, Finn and River Foyle north-east of Lifford town. The strategic significance of these rivers from earliest times, in terms of transport, food, political and social use, would have been fundamental to the local inhabitants to the area. This is demonstrated by the archaeological record, particularly the presence of an extraordinarily large volume of standing stone sites a high volume of

prehistoric finds from the area (stone and metal axe heads; flint tools; bronze age burials (cists) and food vessels, etc.).

In addition to the riverine environment, there is a landscape of rolling well-drained drumlin terrain, which would have been very conducive to past human settlement. Although the overall early medieval record of ringfort/enclosure sites are not abundant within the study area, it is possible that later post-medieval plantation period agricultural practices may have levelled same.

Previous studies undertaken by Brian Lacey (2006) highlight the significance of Croaghan Hill (located at the southern terminus area), and the associated border lands of the *Cenél Eoghain* and *Cenél Conaill*, a much-contested area of political and territorial control during the early medieval period. Similarly, early ecclesiastical sites are not widely distributed throughout the study area although the medieval church and graveyard site at Clonleigh, north-east of Lifford, does have 6th century origins and associations with the *Cenél Conaill* and *Cenél Eoghain* (Lacy, 2004) whilst a church and graveyard at Raymoghly has later and post-medieval fabric and remains. As such, it is likely that hitherto unrecorded medieval settlement sites exist in a sub-surface state throughout the study area as well as the possibility of unknown burial grounds/church sites.

During the sixteenth century, Lifford Castle was built in 1527 by Maghnus O'Donnell, and was to become a much-contested fortification throughout the late medieval period. Circa 1600, the O'Donnells are recorded in the AFM as having battled with the English forces and those of Niall Garbh occupying Lifford, at the Deelee Valley, on the banks of the river Deelee, in the townland of Murlough. Today, nothing remains of Lifford castle nor of the 'good strong fort of lime and stone' that succeeded it, built in 1611 by Sir Richard Hansard, who established Lifford town and the village of Ballindrait along the banks of the River Deelee.

The study area has associations with King James II and the siege of Derry, 1689. There is reference to King James II having spent some time at Cavanacor House before marching onwards to Derry and it seems that this event ultimately saved the house from destruction as the army destroyed all remaining Protestant houses in the locality upon their retreat.

The 18th and 19th centuries brought the development of high and low status housing and urban settlements throughout Ireland. In particular local landlords improved their estates and built residences for themselves. This is demonstrated in the environs of the proposed study area by several country houses such as Croaghan House and Cavanacor House as well as a series of well-built farmsteads and mill houses.

Unfortunately, as well as having some of the best land and one of the greatest concentrations of archaeological monuments in Donegal, this area also has some of the highest rates of monument destruction. The area was extensively colonised in the early seventeenth century and has been intensively cultivated since then. Even if some perception of its ancient significance had survived in the locality until the time of the Plantations, much of it would have been swept away by the cultural dislocation. This, together with the fact that the *Cenél Conaill* had been driven south at the end of the eighth century, meant that its ancient importance as an ancestral and ritualised landscape was largely lost in the local memory.