

THE MEADOW OF MAOLÁN'S HOUSE

Paul Logue, Barney Devine and Jonathan Barkley identify a Gaelic moated site and its owners in County Fermanagh.



Background to the dig

In September 2019, around 300 local people participated in a survey and excavation project at a moated site in Clontymullan townland, Co. Fermanagh (Fig. 1). The dig revealed a demonstrably Gaelic moated site and linked it to fifteenth-century Fermanagh aristocrat Toirdelbach Maguire, son of a regional sub-king.

Clontymullan townland, *Cluain Tí Maoláin* (the Meadow of Maolán's House), lies along the Arney River around 7km south of Enniskillen and is a long, narrow townland of good grazing land. Located about halfway along the townland is a riverside earthwork enclosure known locally as Clontymullan Fort (FER 229:023; Fig. 2). Working with Paul Logue of HED, through funding provided to the Cuilcagh to Cleenish Project by the Northern Ireland Heritage Fund and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council, the community appointed Northern Archaeology Consultancy Ltd to help them undertake an investigation of the fort.

Local interest in the fort was raised during 2015/16 when, working with Paul Logue of the HED and the Centre for Archaeological Fieldwork at QUB, local people identified the fording place of the Arney called the 'Ford of the Biscuits'. Located in Clontymullan townland only a few fields from the fort, the

ford was the site of a battle in August 1594, when a Crown army column intent on resupplying the garrison at Enniskillen Castle was attacked and routed by a Gaelic confederate force. The event became known as the Battle of the Ford of the Biscuits owing to the food supplies abandoned there by the Crown soldiers. Subsequent finds of Bronze Age metalwork at the ford showed the great age of the routeway and crossing point, identifying it as an ancient route from Connacht into Ulster. That first project earned the community a British Archaeology Award and inspired them to further expand their understanding of their landscape through investigation of Clontymullan Fort. The hope was that the enclosure was in fact a late medieval Gaelic moated site associated with a branch of the aristocratic Maguire family. The Arney River was navigable and well known historically as an excellent salmon river. Control of that resource, along with oversight of the nearby strategic ford, was, we think, the reason for the possible presence of a Gaelic elite site.

Above: Fig. 1—The dig begins on the main island: the landowners, Trevor and Samuel Wilson, turn the first sod.

Right: Fig. 2—Clontymullan location map.

The site

Clontymullan Fort is a moated site comprising two islands ditched around the west, south and east sides, the ditch connecting with the river on the north side (Fig. 3). On average the ditches are around 5–7m wide; though all remain wet, some are less so except in times of heavy rains and flood. The main island is mostly taken up by an earthen-banked enclosure, 35m x 25m, with a berm outside it fronting onto the riverbank. The earthen banks are 5–6m wide and 1.1m high internally. At the west is an outer bank





4.5m wide and 1.5m high that was only partially surveyed owing to heavy undergrowth. There are three possible entrance gaps, one to the land facing west, one to the river facing north and a third opposite the smaller island. The smaller island, termed 'the annex' during the project, is square in plan, measuring 17m across. It too is enclosed by earthen banks but narrower than those of the main island. The southern side of the annex appears to have a landing stage for boats with an accompanying path up onto the island. The two islands were presumably connected by bridge, with the enclosures still having opposing gaps in their banks to allow this. It was planned to excavate several small trenches at the site; only seven were opened owing to time and preservation constraints. The excavation strategy was to uncover enough archaeological remains to characterise and date the site while preserving as much of it as

Above: Fig. 3—Post-excitation plan of Clontymullan Fort.

possible. Consequently, we tended to excavate to the top of features and then sample them through sections. Following undergrowth clearance, a preliminary geophysical survey was undertaken on the main island by Earthsound Geophysics, which identified the positions of five potential structures, some possibly of stone.

The likely presence of a late medieval Gaelic elite site beside the River Arney was first identified in the 1950s by Seamus MacCionnath (1955, 115–17). His suggested site was a 23m-diameter circular enclosure (now destroyed and likely to have been a small early medieval ringfort) located beside the river in Drumsroohil townland, 2km west of Clontymullan. We believe that our dig and historical research places Clontymullan Fort as the most likely candidate yet identified.

The community excavation

The annex

Two 1m x 1m trenches (4 and 5) were excavated on the annex (Fig. 3). No archaeological features were found but, given the landing site on its southern side and that it was deliberately separated from the main island, perhaps to mark out the site of an exclusive building, it seems certain that the annex requires further examination.

The main island

Five trenches were opened on the main island (Fig. 3). Trenches 1 and 9 were located at potential entrances from the riverbank and the land respectively. No prepared surfaces or other entrance features were uncovered but good sections were obtained through the bank, showing it to be made up of redeposited subsoil and topsoil.

Trench 2 was positioned in the middle of the enclosure to look for evidence of a central



Left: Fig. 4—Possible evidence for timber sill-beam in Trench 2.

Below: Fig. 5—Section through earth mortar mixing pit, Trench 3.

structure, such as a timber hall. A linear feature was indeed found to cross the trench on a north-south alignment (Fig. 4). The feature was 0.32m wide by 3.2m long, filled by a single charcoal-rich deposit. At only 8cm deep it may represent not so much a cut feature as the impression of a timber sill-beam that was pressed into the ground surface through the weight of the structure that it supported. The charcoal fill could be evidence for the burning of that structure, but time did not allow the feature to be traced further. Nineteen sherds of Medieval Ulster Coarse Pottery, an iron nail, iron slag, glass slag and burnt bone fragments were recovered from this trench.

Trench 3 was located on the southern side of the fort, perpendicular to Trench 2, with the aim of identifying other structural evidence. It also allowed examination of a narrow subrectangular area of wet ground, measuring 2.5m (north-south) by 10m (east-west), suspected to represent a cut feature (or features) now holding water in a dry spell. The section revealed the wet area to indeed be a cut feature, filled primarily with a light grey and orange mixed clay subsoil, overlain by a darker clay which was used to backfill the feature after use (Fig. 5). This feature strongly resembled those identified by Shirley Markley in this magazine (*Archaeology Ireland*, Winter 2018) as earth mortar mixing pits used at historic Irish sites. We contacted Shirley, who was able to visit the dig and confirm this. Building with earth mortar involves the use of mixed wet clay subsoil and small stones as a

bonding agent between masonry courses rather than lime mortar. The earth mortar is first mixed in shallow pits dug adjacent to the structure. As later medieval stone structures are commonly robbed of their stone after disuse and the earth mortar simply returns to the earth, all evidence of such structures can disappear, leaving their prior existence marked only by the earth mortar mixing pits. The sampled feature, along with two other wet areas (see Fig. 3), may mark the location of a central large stone building at Clontymullan whose ruins were probably removed to build a nearby stone farmhouse and outbuildings.

At the base of the enclosure bank in Trench 3 were two post-holes, one of which contained two pieces of Medieval Ulster Coarse Pottery and small fragments of burnt bone. A stake-hole was found on top of the bank. At the northern end of Trench 3 a post-hole was uncovered, along with an east-west-running linear feature possibly marking a timber sill-beam carrying a return wall of the timber structure found in Trench 2. Other finds from Trench 3 included Medieval Ulster Coarse Pottery, an iron nail, iron and glass slag and a flint end scraper.

Trench 7 was located to the western side of the enclosure in order to examine the possibility of ancillary structures, such as workshops and stores. It was positioned over one of five geophysical anomalies in that area. Two definite features were uncovered, representing the remains of a small iron furnace base and an arrangement of four stones associated with a patch of burning that could well be another furnace location. Between these two features was a linear gully 0.45m wide, possibly marking out another structure.

The recovery of 53 sherds of Medieval Ulster Coarse Pottery and fragments of burnt bone from the excavation of the main island indicates domestic activity (Fig. 6). Medieval Ulster Coarse Pottery is a locally produced Gaelic ware that first appears in the Irish archaeological record around the thirteenth





Left: Fig. 6—Medieval Ulster Coarse Ware sherds.

century but continues in use through evolving forms until the seventeenth century. Based on the fabric, rim style and decoration of the Clontymullan sherds, the assemblage recovered dates from the fifteenth–sixteenth century. No other pottery types were found during the excavation and, apart from a few pieces of Arney brick associated with nearby nineteenth-century brick-making sites, nothing was uncovered that could be dated earlier than the fifteenth century or later than the sixteenth century. The iron and glass slag, plus the furnace evidence, indicates the type of small-scale industrial activity commonly noted at elite Irish sites. As the current date range rules out any earlier Anglo-Norman or later English occupation, we should look to local Gaelic élites for a possible occupier.

Placing the site in historical context

Toirdelbach Maguire and his sons held lands along the Arney and maintained a residence beside the river, mentioned in the Irish chronicles (mainly the *Annals of Ulster* (AU)) from 1446 to 1512. Their residential site was subjected to a night attack by local rivals in 1446 (AU), when Toirdelbach's wife was burned to death within. The unfortunate lady was not named but was said to be 'the daughter of Tigheman ... Ua Ruairc', probably showing an alliance built up by Toirdelbach with the O'Rourkes of Breifne. In 1455 (AU) Toirdelbach raided the McClancy moated site at Rosclogher on Lough Melvin, captured the crannog associated with it and then returned to his own 'house with victory of overthrow'.

Toirdelbach consistently sided with the O'Donnells of Donegal rather than the O'Neills of Tyrone and he is recorded as being on a hosting in Westmeath with O'Donnell in 1475 (AU). Later the same year, presumably as a result of Toirdelbach's support for the O'Donnells, Henry O'Neill raided and burned his house, said to be 'beside the [River] Arney'. Toirdelbach met his end in October 1481 (AU), when he was slain 'in treachery in his own castle' by rival Maguires. At his death he was described (AU) as 'the son of a sub-king that was best in hospitality and leadership and that had best knowledge of every science and was best in intelligence and most bought of bardic composition that was in Ireland in his own time'. He was clearly a man of some culture and sophistication, patronising learned families and individuals, and the term castle (*caislen*) could imply that he had a stone building at his site on the Arney.

Following Toirdelbach's death, his son Philip maintained the alliance with the O'Donnells. In 1499 (AU) the castle of Drowes, Co. Donegal, was taken from Aedh O'Donnell by his son Donchadh 'of the Thumbs'. Philip Maguire is recorded as coming to Aedh's aid and helping recapture the castle by first defeating Donchadh in single combat and then handing him over to Aedh. As a reward Philip was given 60 cows as well as the captive Donchadh O'Donnell. We are told that Philip brought his defeated foe back to Fermanagh, 'to his house', presumably beside the Arney.

Philip Maguire's lands were raided in 1502 (AU) by the Breifne O'Reillys, who burned 'the

level part of the country above Clann-Amhlaim' (Clanawley). This seems to be a reference to a level area of good grazing land called Bunowen (*Baile Bun Abhainn*, 'the place of the river mouth'), the local name for a group of townlands at the nearby mouth of the Arney River where it enters Upper Lough Erne opposite Inishmore Island. The place seems to have been a favoured target for raids. Bunowen was later made famous by the eminent American anthropologist Henry Glassie in his two books on Ballymenone (*Baile Bun Abhainn*). In 1512 (AU) another raid on the family's Arney lands was carried out by the O'Neills. This time the O'Neills 'seized many spoils' but were caught and defeated at Bunowen, when many of the raiding party 'were slain and drowned' while trying to cross the Erne 'between Baile Bun Abhainn and Inishmore'. Five years later, in 1517 (AU), Philip, son of Toirdelbach, died. The *Annals of Ulster* called him 'an eminent leader and pleasant person'—not a bad way to be remembered.

A success so far

The results of the excavation match well with historical references. Clontymullan Fort is a Gaelic moated site, the type of enclosure known to have been occupied by elite Irish society in the medieval and later medieval periods, and the excavated remains there have so far been dated to the fifteenth–sixteenth century. The dig seems to have identified two phases of occupation at the site, one a central timber structure and the other a central stone structure. Although no phasing has been identified and more work is required, this does tentatively align with the historical records whereby the house at Toirdelbach Maguire's lordship site was burned down in 1466 and needed replacing, possibly in stone, given the 1481 reference to a *caislen* and the continued references to the site in the sixteenth century. As such, we hope that we have not only undertaken what may be the first excavation of a demonstrably Gaelic moated site in Ireland but also identified its owner(s). We aim to return to Clontymullan in 2021. ■

Further reading

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