

A Look upon the Lakes

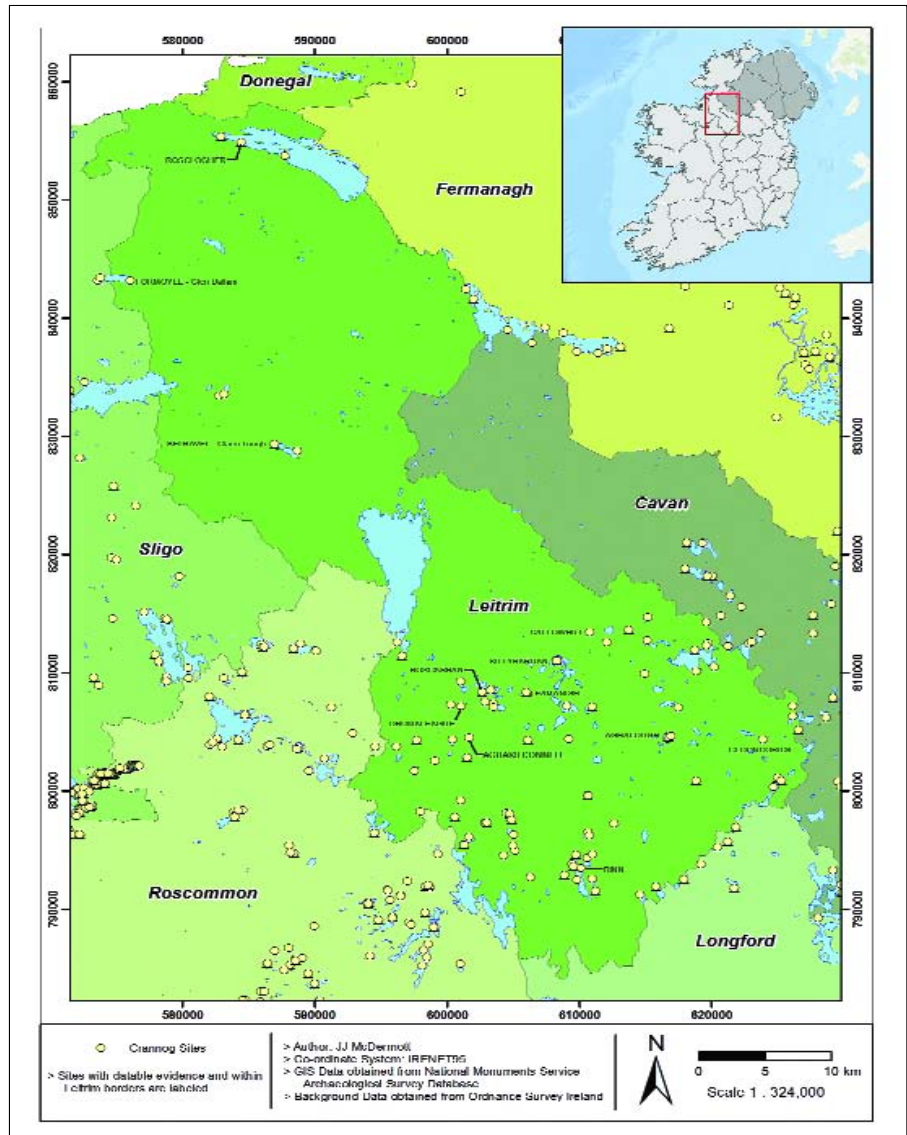
The Archaeology of Crannógs & Inis Sites of Co Leitrim JJ McDermott



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WHEN MANY OF us think of the Middle Ages in Co Leitrim (or West Breifne as it was known then), we imagine the turbulent days of the O'Rourke lords and their feuds with other ruling clans such as the MacClancys in the north and the MacRaghalls in the south. We also envision how their castle fortifications once stood prominent in the landscape and functioned as the centres of power and administration, such as Leitrim Castle on the River Shannon or the castle at Dromahaire on the River Bonet. As this may somewhat have been the case in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the years prior to this would have been very different.

There are a number of annal references to Gaelic stronghold fortifications from pre-1400 dates, particularly in western areas of the country, and these mostly refer to sites such as crannógs, inis or island sites. The distributional evidence of crannógs across Ireland for example, suggests that these



■ Distribution map of crannógs and inis sites in Co Leitrim

site types were quite common in areas such as north Connacht and western Ulster, particularly in the drumlin belt that runs west to east across this region. We can see from the Archaeological Survey of Ireland sites and monuments database that there are 93 crannóg and inis or island sites so far located and recorded within the boundary of Co Leitrim. It is then reasonable for us to suggest that crannóg and inis sites were commonly inhabited by the Gaelic Irish

such as the O'Rourkes in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Giraldus Cambrensis (or Gerald of Wales), himself an Anglo-Norman visitor to the country in the twelfth century, also provides further evidence of this in his *Topographia Hibernica* by stating that Gaelic Irish lords often lived on 'islands' in lakes, utilising them as places of safety, refuge and habitation.

Furthermore, recent research based on the scientific dating of timbers in



■ Crannóg or inis site on Belhavel Lough

Co Fermanagh has shown that crannógs were occupied in the region right up until c.1600. Indeed, the analysis of the crannóg at Drumclay (outside Enniskillen) by Cathy Moore and Nora Bermingham has confirmed an occupational phase extending from 670 AD right up until the seventeenth century. It has previously been argued that the continued use of crannógs as Gaelic residences in western Ulster is a possible explanation as to why relatively few stone-castles were constructed prior to the Plantation of that province in the early seventeenth century. In West Breifne however, there is evidence to show that tower houses were built by Gaelic lords from the early fifteenth century onwards, some of them on top of pre-existing sites such as crannógs. For example at Rosclogher on Lough Melvin, the MacClancys located their three to four storey tower house on an existing crannóg there in the early fifteenth century.

Crannógs can be defined as artificially built islands, usually situated in shallow areas on small lakes but rarely on rivers. These sites were less complex and not as elaborately defended as Anglo Norman fortifications but having said this, they were still regarded as 'fortresses' in the sources and several examples would have had surrounding palisades made of post and

wattle. There is recorded evidence of timber palisades at several crannóg and inis sites on the lakes across Co Leitrim, the majority of which are located in the south of the county (see map). Unfortunately none of the timbers at these sites have been subjected to dendrochronological or radio-carbon dating as of yet, however based on the results of recent studies carried out in neighbouring Co. Fermanagh, it is likely that many of these sites have associations with the later medieval period (c. 1100 AD to 1600 AD).

There are several historical references from West Breifne to support this. A crannóg on Claenlough (known to be Belhavel Lough, near Killargue village), for example is mentioned in 1247 when Miles MacGoisdéibh captured and garrisoned the site, expelling Cathal MacRagnall from it. A crannóg on Lough Scur in the townland of Roscarban has been described as the possible lordly site of the MacRagnalls from the fourteenth century, where four sons of Cathal MacRagnall had been executed in 1345. The annals also reference a site called 'Inis Ochta' on Upper Lough MacNean, near Glenfarne village, from 1499, where Melaghlín MacRagnall was taken prisoner by Con Carragh O'Rourke and shortly afterwards freed by Rory Maguire. This inis site has been postulated to be Port Island on

the border of Counties Leitrim and Cavan where there are the remains of a ruined structure at its centre, possibly a tower house. There is also mention of a crannóg at the eastern end of Glencar Lake in the townland of Formoyle (named as Gleann Dallain) from 1541, when the site along with the adjacent 'town', had been burned by the sons of Donnell O'Rourke. There is also a much earlier reference to an 'Innis-na-lainne' in 1092, where it is claimed there was a wooden fortress associated with Hugh O'Rourke, lord of Dartry. It is likely that this refers to the site of Gleann Dallain at a much earlier time.

Several interesting finds that point to suggestive dates for crannógs and inis sites from the region have been uncovered over the last couple of centuries too. A series of crannógs in the lakes of south Co Leitrim for example were assessed by divers from the Office of Public Works during various arterial drainage works in the late 1960s and early 1970s and it appears that many archaeological objects were acquired by the National Museum of Ireland as a result. At one of the crannógs in Lough MacHugh (west of Mohill town) for example, a medieval ring brooch was discovered, with subsequent studies suggesting it to have come from the garb of an Anglo Norman soldier. A dugout timber canoe and mortises (a structural timber joint) were also found near a crannóg on Callowhill Lough, just outside Ballinamore town. Three silver coins dating to the reigns of King Edward I, II and III of England (thirteenth and fourteenth centuries) were discovered along with a quernstone at the two crannógs on St. John's Lough in Kiltybardan, further west of Ballinamore town. On a crannóg at the western part of Lough Rinn in a townland called Tulcon, several pieces of medieval metalwork and pottery were purportedly discovered too. Earlier drainage works in



■ Port Island on Upper Lough MacNea

the 1840s also resulted in the discovery of various artefacts and features from Co. Leitrim crannógs, such as two dugout canoes, a bronze arrow and a spearhead in the vicinity of a crannóg on the east of Lough Rinn, in the townland of Rinn near Mohill town. As a possible coincidence, the annals refer to an event that took place at a location called Gurtin na Spideoige in the townland of Fedaro (not far away from Lough Rinn) in 1345 when the king of Connacht, Turlough O'Conor was killed by 'the shot of an arrow'. It is tantalizing to suggest that the discovery is linked to this remarkable occurrence!

The many crannóg and inis sites that exist throughout Co Leitrim are of considerable importance to the archaeological record, not only on a regional level but on a national and international level as well. The incredible recent discoveries at the Drumclay crannóg, just across the border in Co Fermanagh, has prompted the site to be described as the most significant excavated wetland settlement in the world. These sites are in a relatively protective and preserving environment being surrounded by water but many are exposed to the elements and as we have seen in the past, prone to looting and illegal damage. Unfortunately,

they have not been surveyed or studied in any great detail either. There is clearly a plausible case here for the systems of power, regionally and nationally, to engage further with these remarkable sites and monuments in Co Leitrim, not only in ensuring their future protection but in shedding more light on their past functions and status. This could be achieved by commissioning underwater and on-land archaeological surveys of a selection of crannógs with the intent of disseminating the results to the wider public through interpretative signage, maps and local publications.

References

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SNIPPET

IRISH LADIES FLY FISHING TEAM



■ The Irish ladies fly fishing team were hosted at Lough Rowan by the Rinn-Shannon & District Angling club members