A Newly-discovered Hillfort at Garrangrena Lower, Co. Tipperary

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While engaged in research on the hillforts of Ireland, the six-inch Ordnance Survey maps for the entire country were searched by the writer for hitherto unnoticed sites. As a result of this, a considerable number of new structures came to light. One of these is that which forms the subject of this note.

The hillfort in question is situated in the townland of Garrangrena Lower, some two miles north-west of Borrisoleigh, in North Co. Tipperary. It encloses a prominent eminence which lies in the centre of a wide belt of north-east, south-west running mountains of Old Red Sandstone lithology. The hill rises to a maximum height of 1043 feet above O.D., and the slopes are quite steep on all sides, but especially on the north and west (Plate I : 1). The hillfort defences run near the rounded, heather-strewn summit, between the 900 ft. (274 m.) and 950 ft. (290 m.) contours. These defences consist of a single rampart with an external ditch, which encloses a roughly circular area of about 5 acres, with maximum internal dimensions of about 145 m. by 165 m. (Fig. 1).

The bank is now, for the most part, worn and grass-grown, and rises above a shallow, silted-up fosse (Plate I : 2). Because of the thick heather and gorse-covering, it is not possible on superficial inspection to ascertain with certainty the nature of the construction of the bank, but it appears to be of dry-stone masonry. In the north it rises to a height of about 1.60 m. above the external ground-level and about 1 m. above the internal ground level of the fort. The ditch in this northern sector consists of a very faint, at times almost invisible depression, about 1.20 m. wide. Bank and ditch are best preserved along the east, where the former rises to as much as 2.50 m. above the surface of the ditch outside and attains a basal width of some 5 m. Towards the west the bank is almost worn away, being barely discernible, for the most part, as a slight swelling about 50 cm. to 60 cm. high. In the west the ditch has completely eroded away.

It is now possible to identify the entrance with any certainty, and no traces of hut-sites or other structures within the enclosure are present. A local inhabitant informed the writer that he knew the site as "Garralis," and added that "once there was a village on the hill."

The Garrangrena Lower site adds a further example to the ever-growing list of Irish hillforts. These structures have up to very recently been almost totally ignored in the Irish archaeological literature and at times their very existence as a type in this country has been denied. Now, however, there are approximately forty sites known in Ireland which can be classed under the general term "hillfort." These include three

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1 Parish, Glenkeen; barony, Kilmannagh Upper; O.S. 6' sheet 28; O.S. 1/2' sheet 18; Nat. Grid Ref. S.008.069. I am deeply indebted to Miss Nuala Sproule, M.A., who surveyed the site with me in most unpleasant weather conditions.

2 The plan is based on that shown on the relevant Ordnance Survey 25' sheet for the area.
basic types: I—simple, univallate sites; II—more complex sites with two or more widely-spaced ramparts; III—a small number of inland promontory forts which must also be included in this group. There are also some unique sites such as Clogher, Co. Tyrone, which do not fit into any of the three main categories.

The Garrangrena Lower hillfort fits into Class I, the univallate group, and it is interesting to note that these sites have a predominantly eastern distribution, stretching from Co. Antrim in the north to Co. Kilkenny in the south (Fig. 2). There are, however, a few examples outside this area, in counties Donegal, Fermanagh, Sligo and Clare. About half the known hillforts fit into this class. Though characterised
Fig. 2. Univallate hillforts in Ireland
by the possession of a single line of defence, these forts vary considerably in such details as size, structure and siting. For instance, the area enclosed may vary from one acre to fifty acres. The fort may be on a low rounded hill in the midst of fertile countryside or it may be perched high up on an inaccessible rocky peak. The ramparts themselves may be of earth or of stone, and ditches are not always present. However, in spite of these differences it seems reasonable, in the present light of our knowledge, to treat the univallate sites as a broadly uniform group having a loose and generalised cultural significance. The tendency towards an eastern distributional bias is striking but whether this denotes a stream of cultural influence from the neighbouring island of Britain must for the moment remain a matter of conjecture.

It is not possible to date the Garrangrena Lower hillfort without excavation, and, indeed, our knowledge of hillforts in general in Ireland is extremely limited because of the lack of systematic investigation. Only one site has been effectively excavated to date. This is the single-ramparted fort at Freestone Hill, Co. Kilkenny, a site with considerable superficial resemblance to the Timperary fort in both size and construction. The Kilkenny site gave clear indications of a mid-fourth century date, and the culture represented there, though, in the broadest sense 'Celtic,' showed evidence of extensive contact with a provincial Roman milieu.

Apart from this one site, no other hillfort has provided clear evidence of date in Ireland, but since the hillfort as a type is, generally, to be regarded as an Iron Age phenomenon in Britain and on the Continent, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Irish hillforts, too, fit into this context. All the indications in Ireland, both literary and archaeological, tend to confirm this broad dating. In Ireland, however, the Celtic Iron Age had a long life and, indeed, any hillfort in this country, without excavation, might reasonably be dated to anywhere in the last few centuries B.C. or in the greater part of the first millennium A.D.

The exact function of the enclosed area of any hillfort is again a matter of some speculation, though it seems to the writer that most hillforts are basically defended settlement-sites. Some may have had more significance as assembly places or royal centres, however, and, indeed, sites such as Rath na Riogh at Tara, Co. Meath, seem to have had strong ritual and perhaps even sepulchral importance.

There are no historical records of any sort referable to Garrangrena Lower; its steep slopes and exposed position certainly suggest that the site was chosen for its defensible situation and thus the structure can legitimately be referred to as a fort. The reference by the local inhabitant to the former existence of a "village" on the hilltop is, perhaps, interesting, but is hardly of significance in the present discussion since the date of such a settlement, if it ever existed, must be entirely speculative.

The Garrangrena Lower hillfort, even though it adds little to our knowledge of the Iron Age in Ireland, is nonetheless interesting and important, and its chance discovery—by a perusal of the Ordnance Survey maps—demonstrates the strong possibility, indeed certainty, that many more structures of this type will come to light when the maps are more closely searched and as aerial photography and detailed fieldwork proceed.

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3 Important excavations of other Irish hillforts are in progress at Emain Macha (Navan Fort), Co. Armagh, under the direction of Mr. D. M. Waterman, at Clogher, Co. Tyrone, under the direction of Mr. R. B. Warner, at Dún Ailinne, Co. Kildare, under the direction of Dr. B. Wailes, and at Rathgall, Co. Wicklow, under the direction of the writer.

1. Garrangrena Lower, Co. Tipperary: general view of hillfort from East
(Photo: B. Raftery)

2. Garrangrena Lower, Co. Tipperary: rampart from outside, looking North
(Photo: B. Raftery)