Lorrha Motte, County Tipperary

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At the present time much research work is underway in Britain, Ireland and on the continent into the origin and development of the earth and timber castle. Until relatively recently it had been thought that the motte, usually accompanied by a bailey, was the principal form of earthwork castle and that it was the castle of the Norman conquest of England in 1066. More and more evidence is, however, coming to light to show that at the time of William I's invasion of England the motte was present only in small numbers in Normandy and that many of the castles built in England (and in Wales later on) in 1066 and the years immediately following were of the enclosure or ringwork form. The first Norman phase at Pevensey, William's landing point, was an earthen enclosure within a corner of the Roman fortifications. Similar expediency is evidenced in Ireland: at Baginbun, Co. Wexford, a motte was not erected—the common form of castle structure of the twelfth century—but the headland was cut off by a bank just as had been the custom in the Iron Age. Recent excavations have shown that even at the site of the Tower of London the first castle was a simple earthen enclosure and, like Pevensey, was constructed within a corner of the Roman defences.

The motte and bailey castle was, for its time, a fairly sophisticated form of defence. The archaeologist specialising in earthwork castles is faced with the problem that not all castles of this type show only one phase of development. Some could stand at the end of a sequence of structures on the site. The motte, in most cases, was used only during an attack and often held out when the rest of the castle fell. The bailey was the residential part of the castle, and in some instances a motte was never added—but this is not to deny that some motte and bailey castles were built as a unit. Those forms of earthwork castle to which a motte was never added have received the archaeological nomenclature of 'ringwork.' As far as Ireland is concerned this is an unsatisfactory term because of the presence of so many thousands of earthworks of a circular form (raths, etc.) constructed over a wide timespan. Not all Norman 'ringworks' were, however, circular, and it is more satisfactory to refer to some as 'an enclosure earthwork castle'—for example that built in London.


4 The bailey at Castle Neroche, Somerset, has been shown to be the first phase at the site (a natural response—to defend oneself quickly) and the motte has been added at a later date: Medieval Archaeol., 8 (1964), 258-259.

5 A very good early description (an attack on Llandovery Castle in Carmarthenshire, Wales) can be found in Brut Y Tywysogion, Cardiff 1955, under the years 1113-1116.
Lorriha Motte—its setting and history  

Lorriha motte, like so many of the Norman settlements of England, Scotland, Wales and Ireland (and as, of course, in Normandy itself), is sited close to the village and next to the parish church (Fig. 1; PI. IV). A stream runs immediately to the east of the motte and to the west there are faint traces of the bailey. A pathway, for field access, has developed between the stream and the motte to the extent that almost half the mound has been eroded away, thus providing evidence for the method of its construction which will be discussed in the next section.

The motte at Lorriha was built in 1207 by John Marshal “who had settled at Terryglass in the early years of the thirteenth century.” In the following year the castle was destroyed by Murchad Ua Briain. The castle is again recorded in 1212, and it would appear that John Marshal had rebuilt it.

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6 Co. Tipperary, O.S. 6-inch sheet 4 (31.3 cm. from southern margin and 45.5 cm. from western margin); Nat. Grid Ref. M.920.041. The motte at Lorriha was brought to my attention by Miss Elizabeth Shes of the Department of Archaeology, University College, Cork; I am grateful to her for assistance at all stages in the production of this study.


8 Ibid., p. 186. Destruction probably involved the felling of the castle’s timber buildings and possibly the wooden keep on the motte top; there is no evidence for this in the investigated section.

9 Ibid., pp. 180 and 239. The later thirteenth century history of Lorriha and district is traced on pp. 189-191.
It is fortunate that Lorra has a recorded history, unlike so many other earthwork castles. In England in the twelfth century some earthen castles were being replaced by stone defences, but fieldwork in Ireland shows us that motte form of castle was very much in the majority. The motte, after all, was cheap and easy to build—two important factors in the Anglo-Norman conquest of Ireland. There are a number of instances in Britain of the late use and occupation of motte and bailey castles (e.g. Sycharth in Denbighshire, Wales), and in Scotland I am prepared to see them in use up to, and including, the fifteenth century.

Lorra Motte—its archaeological interest

Relatively few motte and bailey castles have been investigated archaeologically. There is a great need to excavate a number completely in order to gain information, not only on aspects of occupation but to observe constructional features which can be of technological interest and which might also reflect upon a military situation. The construction of enclosures at Pevensey and London was an immediate response to a particular situation: the need to defend men, property and buildings quickly.

Fig 2. Section in Lorra. Motte, showing tip-lines dipping towards centre of mound

The form of an earthwork and its structural phases might, therefore, yield information not available in the historical record.

The section\(^{11}\) of the motte at Lorrha (Fig. 2, Pl. V, 1) is archaeologically far from perfect. A ‘tidying-up’ operation of half a day produced evidence showing constructional features along half its length. The summit diameter of the motte at this point is 9.80 metres—the basal diameter could not be determined. A tree at the north end and vegetation on the upper part prevented the drawing of a complete section, as did the build-up of collapsed earth from the mound. It was estimated, however, that the base of the drawn section was about 2 metres above the level of the surrounding ground.

The section shows bands of reddish-brown and grey soil which dip towards the centre of the mound. Although only half the section of the motte could be investigated (the southern half was so pitted that a considerable length of time would have been needed to straighten it), some observations, at least, can be made concerning the constructional methods used. A ring-bank was thrown up and this seems to have incorporated layers of turves which would have assisted the achievement of mound stability. This, presumably, circular bank was then in-filled and heightened to form the motte. The banding, or tip-lines, give all the appearance of decayed turf, but confirmatory evidence was not forthcoming from the samples taken.\(^{12}\) Professor O’Kelly (Department of Archaeology, University College Cork) has, however, pointed out to me (in litt. 16. xi. 1972) that it is usually only under the best conditions of chemical action and preservation that one can find direct evidence of organic matter. The porous nature of the motte material has, he believes, undoubtedly prevented the preservation of the more diagnostic features of the turves.

The depiction of the construction of the motte at Hastings\(^{13}\) on the Bayeux Tapestry has rather influenced our view of the methods of castle building at the time of the Norman conquest of England. The horizontal stratification shown is now felt to be purely an artistic effect. The Tapestry was embroidered over a period of about ten years following the events of 1066 and we cannot be certain that those employed in making it had much technical knowledge of certain aspects of the subject matter.\(^{14}\)

At St. Wernard’s Tump in Herefordshire\(^{15}\) nineteenth century excavations revealed that the motte had been constructed over a burial cairn.\(^{16}\) The excavated half-section showed that a ring of earth was built up around the cairn, and heightened and in-filled to form a castle mound. At Alstoe Mount, in Rutland,\(^{17}\) the excavator found evidence for a similar method of construction. Professor O’Kelly has commented upon this method in his discussion of the secondary bank at Béal Boru, near

\(^{11}\) The section runs approximately NNE-SSW.
\(^{12}\) I am grateful to Dr. J. Dickson of the Department of Botany, University of Glasgow, for his examination of the soil samples.
\(^{14}\) Sir F. M. Stenton (edit.), The Bayeux Tapestry, London 1957, p. 11.
\(^{16}\) A somewhat similar situation has recently been noted in J. Knight and E. J. Tait, “The Excavation of a Castle Mound and Round Barrow at Tre Oda, Whitechurch,” Trans. Cardiff Nat. Soc., 95 (1968-70), 9-23. The motte at Meeflick, Co. Galway, was thrown up, in 1208, around the church tower: J. O'Dwyer, A History of Medieval Ireland, London 1968, p. 78.
Killaloe, Co. Clare. He believes the secondary phase at this site to be an incomplete attempt, by Anglo-Normans, at transforming the ringfort into a motte. There is archaeological evidence elsewhere in Ireland for the adaptation of an existing fortification into a motte (e.g. Lismahon Co. Down) but at Béal Boru, it would appear to me that a mere strengthening of the primary bank was all that was ever intended so that in consequence, the ringfort became an Anglo-Norman ‘ringwork’ castle.

Professor O’Kelly wisely comments that the most sensible way to construct a motte to ensure stability must have been in many cases to throw up a ring bank and in-fill (and perhaps heighten) as outlined above. Another factor can be taken into consideration to account for this manner of construction. A motte being built in hostile territory would be susceptible to attack and the constructional ringbank could act as a defence. There is no suggestion at Lorra that there was even a short occupation of the ringbank before it was in-filled—it was purely a constructional feature and must be a method learned from experience. Time might, of course, have been given (if circumstances allowed) for the soil of the ringbank to settle and consolidate before in-filling, and this might well have been the case if a bailey already existed at Lorra. The turves used in the building of the mound would have facilitated the achievement of stability.

At Aldingham, in Lancashire, a recent rescue excavation at a motte site brought to light evidence for three phases. The first phase was a ringwork, the second represented an in-filling of the ringbank to form a low mound, and the final phase involved the creation of a higher motte which was partially revetted in timber. These three phases were spread over a considerable period of time and did not represent constructional features but a preference for the motte rather than the ringwork.

The investigation at Lorra has been slight, but it has, nevertheless, added further information to the increasingly growing and serious study of the origin and development of the earth and timber castle, whether it be of the motte or ringwork form.

21 A. Herrnbrodt, Der Husterknupp, Cologne 1968—reviewed in English by L. Alcock in Medieval Archaeol., 3 (1959), 332-334. This motte excavation in the North Rhineland shows a probably alien imposition of a motte upon an enclosure fortification. A recently excavated Norman ringwork in Northamptonshire was found to be sited around a Saxon thegny residence: Archaeol. J., 125 (1968), 305-307. Could many earthwork castles overlie Celtic centres of administration?
Aerial view (looking westwards) of Lorra, Co. Tipperary. The motte is situated in the clump of trees, bottom centre. The adjacent bank and ditch (with counter-scarp bank in places) has no known function — it could be monastic but it could equally have served to enclose the secular settlement of Lorra.

(Photo: J. K. St Joseph, Cambridge University Collection: copyright reserved)
1. Section in Lorrha Motte, showing darker tip-lines dipping towards centre (to left) of mound — stout bottle used to provide scale.

*(Photo: E. J. Talbot)*