The Craggaunowen Crannog: Gangway and Gate-Tower

ETIENNE RYNNE and GEARÓID MAC EOEIN

While the replica of an ancient Irish crannog at Craggaunowen, near Quin, Co. Clare (Plate XVII, 1), is undoubtedly impressive and has proved an outstanding success with tourists, two of its more obvious structural features have often caused some archaeologists to decry it, namely the gangway leading to it from the mainland and the imposing gate-tower astride the entrance through its enclosing palisade. No archaeological or other evidence for either feature has ever been put forward, other than its concever John Hunt's belief that gate-towers such as are thought to have been built at British and Continental hillforts could have existed at Irish crannogs — the gangway was generally agreed to be a necessary evil in view of the touristic purpose behind the construction of the crannog. Archaeological evidence for both features has recently been discovered, which appears to find some corroboration in the early literature.

I — The Archaeological Evidence: Crannogs in Cuilmore Lough, near Balla, Co. Mayo

In 1967, following on the Moy Drainage Scheme, the level of Cuilmore Lough, a small lake a mile to the west of Balla, Co. Mayo, had dropped appreciably, but by less than a metre, revealing at least three crannogs (Fig. 1). The late Mr. P. E. Mullaney, former school-master at Balla and long known for his interest in matters archaeological,\(^1\) reported the discoveries to the National Museum. At the Museum's request I later visited the two more important sites in the company of Mr. Mullaney — the third site, in the northern part of the lake, in the townland of Tully Beg,\(^2\) is apparently stone-built and is only accessible by boat (there is also a small crannog-like island more centrally place in the lake, but Mr. Mullaney, who had already visited it, informed me that it is a natural feature). Both the crannogs inspected are in the southern half of the lake and are in the townland of Tully More.

The first of these crannogs (henceforth termed Crannog I) is encountered as one approaches the lake over a high rise from the east and is on the eastern shore of the lake.\(^3\) It is sited on a small, low, rushy ledge now jutting into the lake just above the present water-level; the end of this ledge is 90 metres from the edge of the lake before the recent drainage. The crannog is at present only visible as a series of closely-set stakes which enclose a sub-triangular area about 26m. East-West by 19m. North-

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\(^1\) It was Mr. Mullaney who, in 1933-34, brought the gold armlet from Dooros, Co. Mayo, to public notice, cf. R. Ll. Praeger, The Way That I Went, Dublin 1937, p. 289, for the interesting story associated with the event.

\(^2\) Co. Mayo, O.S. 6-inch sheet 90 (12 cm. from the northern margin and 29.5 cm. from the eastern margin).

\(^3\) Ibid. (15 cm. from the northern margin and 27.7 cm. from the eastern margin).
South, its shape being ordained by the shape of the area on which it was built (Fig. 2). At its western ‘corner’ there are some more stakes forming an annex-like projection, and a somewhat similar but smaller ‘annex’ is at the eastern ‘corner’. In both cases the stakes extend off the edge of the ledge into the present water’s edge. The purpose of these two annex-like features is not at all clear, unless possibly as berthing places for access to the crannog by boat. The eastern, inland, side of the crannog has an inner row of stakes running at an average distance of about 3 m. within the outer row — possibly to provide a stabilising effect to the crannog or perhaps to present an added defensive paling at this, the vulnerable landward part of the crannog. Apart from four apparently stray stakes, the interior of the crannog is empty except for the much-decayed remnants of several horizontally laid planks or beams, which form no apparent plan, near its western side.

All the stakes forming the crannog structure and its ‘annexes’ are between about 12 cm. and 8 cm. in diameter, and seldom rise more than about 5 cm. above the ground. However, to the east of the crannog are three pairs of large stakes or posts set in a line running towards the former lake-edge. These average 15 cm. in diameter and while
Fig. 2. Crannog I, Cuilmore Lough.
three of them do not now rise above ground-level the pair nearest to the crannog both rise to a height of 55 cm. and one of the middle pair rises to a height of 80 cm. The stakes of each pair are about 1 m. apart and the intervals between the pairs, and also between the crannog edge and the nearest pair, are all much the same, averaging out at about 3.75 m. The pair farthest from the crannog is therefore just under 11 m. from it, and although this still leaves a considerable distance between them and the former edge of the lake, these three pairs of posts must surely be interpreted as the last record of a gangway set on stilts which connected the crannog with dry land — perhaps something similar to that which connects the modern replica of a crannog built in 1975 at Craggaunowen (Plate XVII, 1).

The second crannog (henceforth termed Crannog II) at Cuilmore Lough is at the southern end of the lake, just to the east of where a drain or smaller stream enters the lake. It is sited on a long and narrow rushy area, now jutting north-westwards into the lake, just above the present water-level. The site is very unusual in that it is not so much a typical crannog in the normally accepted sense of the term as a double palisade on the landward side, cutting off a promontary-like area in which was, most probably, a circular structure (Fig. 3).

The promontary-like area is on two levels, one about 15-20 cm. higher than its surrounding area. The palisade curves across the higher area, extending for only a short distance at one end onto the lower area; the maximum length of the palisade is 22 m. There are two arcs forming the palisade, the outer one consisting of somewhat larger stakes than the inner one. In both arcs the stakes increase in diameter (i.e. in strength) as they approached the centre, those in the outer arc ranging from end-stakes 10 cm. in diameter to stakes 30-35 cm. in diameter near the centre, and those in the inner arc ranging from end-stakes 10 cm. in diameter to stakes 17-20 cm. in diameter near the centre. Most of the stakes of both arcs are still quite high, two of them reaching a height of 60 cm., but the majority vary between about 20 and 45 cm. in height. Most stand vertically, except the stakes in the western half of the outer arc which slope slightly inwards and two of the matching stakes of the inner arc which slope in the other direction.

Centrally placed, interrupting the two arcs, are the remains of four relatively massive posts arranged as if marking the corners of a structure 2 m. square. These posts measure 35 cm., 38 cm., 42 cm., and 43 cm. in diameter, the first two now standing 20 cm. above ground-level and the other two standing 15 cm. and 10 cm. high respectively. The only logical interpretation applicable to this arrangement would appear to be that the four posts were the four corner-posts of a gate-tower, probably one very similar to that erected at the entrance to the Craggaunowen replica-crannog (Plate XVII, 1). In the neighbourhood of these four massive posts are some large split timbers about 4.0-4.50 m. in length. Four of these lie horizontally in the same alignment as the palisade, and there are two outside the palisade, probably in displaced positions. Some wooden branch-like fragments lie at approximately right-angles across the timbers within the four massive posts. The purpose of these large timbers is not clear, unless they acted as the foundation layer of a path through the gate-tower.

Just over 15 m. north-westwards from the palisade in an arc of small posts (about 5-8 cm. in diameter), only one of which rises (10 cm.) above ground-level. This arc could

\[4\text{Ibid. (16.5 cm. from the northern margin and 28.7 cm. from the eastern margin).} \]
be the last remnants of a circular structure, probably a house, about 7.50 in diameter. Within this area is one stake, 15 cm. in diameter, standing about 12 cm. above ground-level, and also the decayed remnants of some planks or beams laid almost as if aligned on the circle's centre.\textsuperscript{5}

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Although it is not now possible to know the level of the lake when these crannogs were built, it would seem reasonable to believe that it was at a level somewhat higher than the present artificially reduced level but perhaps somewhat lower than the level before the recent drainage. Arguments in favour of this are mainly based on the nature of the palisade of Crannog II: it does not extend across the lower ledge-like level of the promontary-like area, and this suggests that at the time of its construction the lake's water must have covered this ledge, while if the water had covered the higher level to the same depth as before the drainage then there would not have been sufficient indication of the nature of the land to induce the builders to use it in such a manner. At the proposed water-level, somewhat between the levels before and after the recent drainage, Crannog I would, as one would expect, have been completely surrounded by very shallow water and the distance from it to dry land would have been less than before the drainage, perhaps thus accounting for the absence of evidence for the gangway beyond the third pair of supporting posts. Crannog III, furthermore, would not have been completely covered — as it was before the present drainage.

Perhaps one of the more fascinating new features encountered is the peculiar nature of Crannog II. While clearly using the same basic idea as do the many promontary forts around our coasts, this site should more properly be regarded as a crannog as the area the palisade cuts off, and in which is the house-like structure, would probably have been originally awash with shallow water. The gate-tower and the adjacent parts of the palisade may, however, have been built just clear of the water, which would, perhaps, explain the necessity for the heavy timbers as foundations for a pathway through the gate-tower. The very nature of Crannog II is of interest in itself in that it provides yet another useful link between crannogs, ringforts and promontary forts.

The real interest in these sites, however, is the new evidence encountered for the first time. This new evidence includes the gangway feature at Crannog I and the gate-tower feature at Crannog II, both of which vindicate the intuitive inspiration of the late John Hunt on whose basic conception and design the Craggaunowen replica-crannog was built.

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2: Some Literary Evidence on Crannog Structure

It is remarkable how rare are the references in Early Irish literature to lakew-dwellings. For crannoc the Royal Irish Academy's Dictionary of the Irish Language

\textsuperscript{5}I wish to thank all those, including Mrs. Ann O'Reilly, Messrs. Pat Wallace, Jimmy McDonagh and Martin Timoney, who assisted me in surveying these sites. I am also grateful to Mr. Michael Roberts and Shannon Free Airport Development Co. Ltd., for supplying me with the photograph of Craggaunowen Crannog.
cites only four examples each of which has a proper name attached to it in the genitive so that they are probably to be regarded as placenames. Indeed, they recur in Hogan’s Onomasticon Goedelicum as placenames together with ten others, concentrated in a broad area surrounding Donegal Bay, in counties Donegal, Tyrone, Leitrim, Cavan and Roscommon, with an outlier in Co. Galway. As to date, Hogan’s references are all from annalistic sources between the thirteenth and the early seventeenth century.

Another word of similar meaning is inis which in its usual application means a natural island, with or without habitation. The Dictionary gives five examples of the word in the meaning “an island (often artificial) used as a storehouse or fort”. Of the five examples, two derive from the Middle Irish translation of the story of Alexander the Great, one comes from Saltair na Rann, the great Middle Irish epic of creation, fall, and redemption, one is from the Annals of Tigernach (11th century), and one comes from the Late Middle Irish Cogad Gaedhel re Gallaidh, the history of the Viking wars in Ireland. This latter instance is followed by a list of twelve of the most notable fortresses rebuilt and strengthened by Brian Borama after he had subdued the Norse in 1005. Among these are Inis Locha Cend, Inis Locha Gair, Inis Locha Saiglend, and Inis in Gaill Duib. Hogan in his Onomasticon gives eleven pages of placenames containing the name inis. Some of these will have been artificial islands, but the Irish nomenclature does not make a distinction between them and natural islands. The remarkable feature of the literary references just quoted from the Dictionary is that three of the five refer to foreign events and are found only in translation literature, though, of course, the language and expression is thoroughly Irish. Apart from the paucity of the examples, one is struck also by their lateness. None of them is earlier than the middle of the tenth century and none of them comes from the traditional narratives of saga or seanchas.

References to artificial islands being so rare in the literature, one cannot expect to find much information about their structure. Indeed, none of the texts referred to above supplies any such detail. Nonetheless, it does seem possible to draw conclusions about some features of their structure from other sources which do not refer explicitly to islands but to residences or fortresses in general.

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Some years ago Professor Tomás Ó Maille discussed the word drochat as an element in placenames. In the course of this article he devoted three pages to a detailed analysis of the term airdrochat, a compound of the preposition ar “before” and drochat “bridge”. Editors have usually translated this as “forebridge, front bridge” with little advertance to the structural significance of these terms. Ó Maille argues that airdrochat means “threshold”. However, he seems to me to underrate the significance of his Example 4... iarsind airdrochat... which means “along the airdrochat” thus implying a much more substantial structure than a threshold. Again, Examples 1 and 7, especially the stanza following that quoted from Saltair na Rann by Ó Maille, speak of the airdrochtait of heaven as a “path” (sét) on which thousands make their way to the heavenly mansion. The airdrochtait are described in Saltair na Rann 468f. as consisting

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of ascending steps. This description fits in with and allows us to retain the latest example (17th century) quoted by Ó Máiille which he regarded as an inaccurate archaism. It also fits in well with the other examples of the word quoted by Ó Máiille, showing that the airdrochat was a structure (maybe with steps) leading to the door of the house, which could become dirty (presumably from being walked on), and that the cleaning of the airdrochat (with a shovel) was a regular chore of the household which had to be carried out before guests could be received. This points to a meaning more in keeping with the traditional translation “forebridge, front bridge” than Ó Máiille’s “threshold”. This is further borne out by the extract from Aislinge Meic Con Glinne quoted below.

Ó Máiille’s contention that it is inconceivable that so many residences, chosen at random over a long period, should have had need of a bridge to cross surrounding water is justified. But a raised walkway built over dry land can also be called a bridge. One must assume that the ground within the early Irish ringfort or farmstead must have been extremely muddy during a great part of the year and the structure we are referring to would have been designed to make it possible to reach the house without walking through the mud. In this way it was a kind of bridge. This would have been all the more so when the house in question was on a crannog and the airdrochat was the bridge connecting it with the land. But none of the attested examples can be identified as such.

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The Old Irish word for ‘lintel’ was fordors, composed of the preposition for ‘on, over’ and the noun dorus ‘door’. The word persists in the modern dialects as fardors /ˈfaːrdərəs/ with the same meaning. At all periods of the language its usual application is to the lintel over the door of a house. Instances of this meaning are to be found in the Royal Irish Academy’s Dictionary of the Irish Language s.v. and need not be cited here.

A few instances in early texts refer to the lintel over the gate of a fortress or city. Thus in the description of Andromache’s dream in Togail Trol, the Middle-Irish adaptation of Dares Phrygius’ De excidio Troiae, in an episode not found in the Latin original, we are told that she dreamt fordors na cathrach do thuttim ‘that the lintel of the city [gate] fell down’ (Book of Leinster, 32730).

Two examples give us more information about the lintel over the gate of a residence or fortress, implying that it could comprise a compartment large enough to hold one or more persons. The clearest instance of this is in the saga Fled Bricrenn (‘Brícciu’s Feast’) dated by Thurneysen to the eighth century, though the surviving texts must have undergone a revision in the eleventh. There are two associated instances in this text, §§44 and 54. In §44 the Ulstermen are approaching the fortress of Cruachain in Connacht. The noise of their approach causes Findabair to go out and inquire its

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cause: Luid Findabair la sodain, ingen Ailella ocus Medba, co mboi isin ngrianán for fordors in duina co n-erbaire: “At-chiú sa caipitech issa mag, a matharnait.” (‘With that Findabair, daughter of Aillill and Medb, went to the compartment9 on the lintel of the fort and said: “I see a chariot-rider coming into the plain, mother dear”.’).

Findabair then describes the approaching Ulstermen from her vantage-point over the gate of the fort and her mother identifies each warrior in turn from these descriptions. The climax is reached with the description and identification of Cú Chulainn. Medb then goes out to receive the Ulstermen: La sodain do-luíde Medb for (leg. fo) fordors ind liss immach isin n-aurlaind ocus trí coeacait ingen lée . . . . (‘With that Medb passed under the lintel and out into the forecourt with thrice fifty girls . . . .’).

In order to render the literary watchman-device credible in real terms one must visualise Findabair in a compartment over the gate of the fort, able to see the approaching Ulstermen, while the more knowledgeable Medb, standing on the ground inside the rampart, was unable to see them. The grianán over the gate would have been a natural vantage-point for a look-out or gate-keeper. In Táin Bó Fraich 41ff. we find such a look-out on the rampart of Cruachain describing the approach of Fraech and his party.10 Though the text does not expressly place him in the compartment over the gate, the analogy with Fled Bricrenn is sufficient to allow us to visualise him there.

Another text which implies the existence of a compartment over the gateway of a residence is Scéla Cano Meic Garthnín,11 a tenth-century fiction based on the apparently historical event of the exile of Cano mac Garthnín, a Scottish prince, to Ireland in the seventh century. In the relevant passage (38-39) Cano has taken refuge with the sons of Aed Sláine, Diarmaid and Bláthmac, who reigned jointly as kings of Tara. At the same time messengers come from Cano’s enemies in Scotland to persuade Diarmaid and Bláthmac to have him and his retinue murdered. Diarmaid’s daughter, who loves Cano, becomes aware of the treachery being planned by her father and uncle and seeks to warn Cano. As all parties were in the same residence, an unidentified Collmag in Ulster, it was necessary for her to exercise the utmost care in choosing an occasion when she could warn him in secret. She takes her place on the lintel over the gate of the residence with a rod in her hand: Rogab immach 7 gebid fleisc in láim 7 luid co mbui forsín fordors ind lis (57ff.) ‘She went out [of the house] and took a rod in her hand and went on to the lintel of the steadings.’ Then as Cano prepared to leave the fort she uttered a verse. (The verses here and in the following are irrelevant for the present discussion.) As he passed under the lintel she spoke to him again: Oc teacht dé fon fordors do-bert-si in slait ina chend 7 dixit . . . . ‘As he passed under the lintel she touched his head with the rod and said . . . .’ Thereafter the story continues: La tobaítr bénme dó oc tuideacht imach, 7 as-bert oc teacht do uaidí . . . . (71ff.) ‘As he went out she struck him and said while he was moving away from her . . . .’ Then follows a poem of three stanzas containing the actual warning.

The reason why the girl went up on the lintel to give her warning was because she had to do so without being observed by her father’s followers in the fort. If the lintel had been a simple beam of timber or stone, it would have been the most conspicuous

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9The meaning of the word grianán as an architectural term and as an element in placenames has been discussed at length by Art Ó Maolbháth: “Grianán I Logainnneacha”, Dinnseanchas, 6 (1974), 60-75.
spot in the fort. But if it consisted of a compartment, as in Fled Bricrenn, it would have afforded her concealment while she spoke to Cano passing beneath, out of sight of anyone inside the rampart. The purpose of the rod was to attract his attention silently by touching him as he passed by. As a compartment in which a person could stand upright would have placed her too high to be able to touch him with her hand, she needed a rod to reach him.

A further relevant instance, which has not been quoted in connection before now, occurs in Aislinge Meic Con Glinne (ed. K. Meyer (1892), pp. 87-91). Mac Con Glinne recounts his vision of a journey to the Land of Food. He tells how he arrived at a lake-dwelling by boat: ‘Atom-ciurethar suas dó as mo ethar,’ or Mac Con Glinne, “co dorus erdaim imdorais in dúnait dianechtair . . .” (p. 87. “I rose up out of my boat towards the door of the blockhouse of the outer gate of the dwelling . . .”). Then, having described the gate-keeper, he tells how he entered the enclosure: “Co n-acea tra iar ndul anund,” or Mac Con Glinne, “fó ro laim chli, i. mogaid ind Fláithlega . . . cona sluastib tur-arðin ina láimu ic fochartad in ottraig ingerta boì forsin [c]lochdrochat breachidin òtha immdorus in tige móir co himdorus in dùine inechtair.” (p. 90. “On entering I saw on my left the servants of the Fláithlag . . . with their shovels of dry bread in their hands, clearing the milky filth from the stone bridge of custard which ran from the door of the great house to the outer gate of the enclosure.”). These two connected extracts are evidence for both structural features here under discussion. The particulars of the gate-tower are not clear enough to allow us to locate it above the gateway, as in Fled Bricrenn and Scél Cano, but it does show a gate-keeper in a closed building at the outer gate of the fort. It also shows the gangway between the door of the house and the main gate of the enclosure with the usual cleaning operation in progress, though here everything is described as consisting of different types of food in keeping with the nature of Mac Con Glinne’s vision.

We have then two clear instances of a gateway involving an overhead compartment. Of course, there is no implication that either Cruachain or Collmag in Ulster had such a gateway at any time. The significance of these references is that writers of the period between the eighth and the tenth century visualised such gateways in composing their tales, thereby showing that these structures existed in their experience.

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1. The Craggaunowen Crannog.  

(Photo: SFADCo)