PREHISTORIC FORTS OF MOGHANE AND LANGOUGH
NEAR DROMOLAND
CO. CLARE

Scale of Feet.

THE T. WALTERS
1893

MOGHANE FORT

MOGHANE CASTLE

PLANTED

CRAGS AND HAZELS

LANGOUGH FORT

RATHFOLLANE

Fig. 1. Westropp's plan of Mooghane hillfort and Langough Fort.
(Reprinted by courtesy of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland)
The Early Iron Age in County Clare

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Although County Clare is not one of the regions archaeologists would automatically associate with the period, there is ample archaeological evidence, in both the form of field-monuments and artifacts, to show that the county experienced an unusual and most interesting Early Iron Age, i.e. the pagan Celtic Period of the last few centuries before and the first few centuries after Christ.

Even though it is generally impossible to closely date most field-monuments confidently without archaeological excavation, there are some which can, because of their general type or special associated features, be included within the Early Iron Age. Hillforts, for instance, are basically an Early Iron Age type of monument, although the type often seems to have continued to be built in later times. Nonetheless, the huge size of Mooghane triple-ramparted hillfort, near Newmarket-on-Fergus, taken in conjunction with the clearly secondary cashels partly built on its ramparts\(^1\) (Fig. 1) seems to clearly indicate an Early Iron Age date for it. The hillfort on Turlough Hill (Fig. 2) in the extreme north of the county, likewise seems to be Early Iron Age in date, though less certainly so.\(^2\)

Fig. 2. Aerial view of hillfort on Turlough Hill, Co. Clare.
(Photo: Cambridge University Collection)

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Fig. 3. Aerial view of Cahercommaun, a cliff-top site in Tullycommon, Co. Clare.
( Photo: Cambridge University Collection)

The multi-vallate cliff-top site of Cahercommaun (Fig. 3), in Tullycommon townland in the centre of the Burren region, is sometimes classed as a hillfort though the excavator, perhaps more reasonably, accepted it as a "definitely defensive" site of cashel type. Although the excavator suggested a ninth century A.D. date for it, B. Raftery would bring it back by about half a millennium, while Caulfield suggests that it "could potentially have a B.C. rather than A.D. date for its construction and initial occupation". By analogy with it and with Dún Aengusa, one might perhaps be forgiven for hinting that Caherlis-macsheedy, near Ballyvaughan, might also be assigned a similar early date.

Caherballykinvarga, a truly massive fort-like stone structure near Kilfenora, can with some confidence be dated to the Early Iron Age because of its apparently terraced wall and surrounding chevaux-de-frise (Fig. 4). The latter feature is a recognised Early Iron Age one, a feature which links Ballykinvarga with four other sites in Ireland, Dún Aengusa and Dubh Cathair on Inishmore, Aran, and at Doonamo and at another site.

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5 Raftery, op. cit., p. 53.
nearby, both on the Mullet, Co. Mayo. It ought perhaps to be pointed out that in all five cases the siting and surrounding terrain of the forts would preclude use of the chevaux-de-frise for defensive purposes, against either chariot or horse-riders, and it would therefore seem much more probable that the feature was erected in each case to provide added status to the sites. These sites can, with their massive stone walls and internal terracing be linked with many other Irish sites, including Caherdooneerish, on Black Head, a site (Fig. 5) which can perhaps best be regarded as an outlier of the seven huge stone cahers on the Aran Islands. The writer believes that these two Clare forts, Caherballykinvarga and Caherdooneerish, the Aran forts, and many other similar sites including Straigue Fort, Grianan O'lligh, O’Boyle’s Fort (‘Doon Fort’ near Portnoo), and Inishmurray, were Early Iron Age ceremonial centres, built for action within rather than without.

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10 Personal communication, Dr. P. O’Flanagan, Department of Geography, University College, Cork.
11 T. J. Westropp, *J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland*, 31(1901), 2, 4-7, and 45 (1913), 60-61, pl. IV, 2; G. Cunningham, *Burren Journey West*, Limerick 1980, p. 32—all three publications, apparently correctly, call this site Caherdooneerish/Cathair Dhúin Irghuis, not Caherdoonfergus as on the Ordnance Survey maps (see pp. 4-5 and fn. 3 on p. 60 of Westropp’s articles for reasons).
12 The writer is preparing a paper on these sites, with special reference to those on Aran, for publication in the *Proceedings of the Prehistoric Society.*
Fig. 5. Westropp's drawing of Caherdooneerish (female figure on top gives scale).
(Reprinted by courtesy of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland)

Fig. 6. Westropp's photograph of terraced wall of Cahermullach (note how figure looks naturally inwards, not outwards).
(Reprinted by courtesy of the Royal Society of Antiquaries of Ireland)
Although maybe one might legitimately include such sites as Cashlaun Garr, Aghaglinny, Lanlough only about 500m. south of Mooglane (Fig. 1), and several others, e.g. Cahermullach (Fig. 6), as Early Iron Age structures of the same general class, it would perhaps be tempting Providence unduly to do so without scientific excavation and further research.

Such sites, however, can only be recognised as ceremonial sites on archaeological grounds, but there are other sites in Co. Clare which are historically recognised ceremonial sites, many associated with pagan or barely christianised rites and most undoubtedly going back to the Celtic Early Iron Age. The most famous of these sites in the county is Magh Adhair, near Tulla, the inauguration site of the Dál gCais’ (Figs. 7 and 8). According to T. J. Westropp, the noted Clare antiquarian, the place “may have been adopted by the Uí gCaisin, the ancestors of the MacNamaras, who seem to have established themselves between this place and Tulla as early as the 5th century”. The nearby triple-ramparted cashel of Cahercalla (Fig. 8:2) might well have been the Early Iron Age chieftain’s residence associated with the ceremonial centre of Magh Adhair, though this, of course, cannot, without excavation of both sites, ever be more than mere

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14 Ibid., pp. 61-62, pl. V, 1—with perspicuity, Westropp ventured the suggestion, “for discussion, not for assertion”, that this site might have been built as a temple rather than a fort.
Fig. 8. Westropp's plan of Magh Adhair (1) and of nearby Cahercalls stone fort (2).
(Reprinted by courtesy of the Royal Irish Academy)
speculation. A *bile* or sacred tree was associated with Magh Adhair,\(^{19}\) and other Clare sites with sacred trees, and thus possibly going back to pre-Christian Celtic times, include Kells, Loughcooter and Kilmoon.\(^{20}\) ‘Toberavilla’, a well near Kilkee East, Ruan, must have been associated with a sacred tree to have obtained its name, and thus likewise may well date from the pre-Christian Iron Age. Indeed, sources of water were often sacred to the pagan Celts, so much so, in fact, that the late R. A. S. Macalister and other authorities believe that most holy wells in Ireland are likely to be really christianised pagan wells.\(^{21}\) There are many such wells in Co. Clare, including ‘Tobercaimin’, near Kilfenora,\(^{22}\) ‘Tobercravan’, near Ennistymon,\(^{23}\) and the most famous of all, St. Brigid’s Well (more properly Daigh Bhride), near Liscannor, associated with one of the three great survivals of the great pagan festival of Lughnasa, and which has been clearly shown to be identified with a pre-Christian god, christianised as St. Mac Creiche.\(^{24}\) Other Co. Clare sites with Lughnasa associations include ‘Tobermacduagh’, near Kinvara, and Slieve Callan.\(^{25}\)

It has also been suggested, with much justification, that many early Irish monasteries were sited on pre-Christian sanctuaries,\(^{26}\) among which might be included such Clare examples as those listed by Sheehan elsewhere in this *Journal* (p. 46).

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\(^{23}\) P. Barry, *Nth. Munster Antiq.*, J., 1, 1976, 80-81, pl. VIII.


\(^{25}\) MacNeill, *op. cit.*, pp. 621 and 193-201 respectively.

Doubtless, too, many of the numerous ringforts, promontory forts and crannogs in Co. Clare date from the Early Iron Age, but without excavation are clearly not assignable to it. In the light of the number of Early Iron Age artifacts from the Corofin neighbourhood, notably the horse-bit and spearhead from Inchiquin Lough (see infra), it might, however, be worth remarking on the crannog at the northern end of Inchiquin Island and the promontory fort across a small headland in Anville townland, jutting into the eastern edge of the lake.

Ring-barrows consist generally of relatively low annular banks with inner ditch; the central, enclosed, area may be left flat or in the smaller examples give the appearance of a low mound. Because of their lowness and consequent insignificance, the smaller ring-barrows are rarely found marked on even the six-inch scale Ordnance Survey maps, on which the larger ones are often marked as if simple mounds or ringforts. Indeed, these monuments have only recently begun to be recognised and accepted for what they are: Early Iron Age burial-sites. Undoubtedly there are many still awaiting identification in Co. Clare, the best-known at present being probably the three in the fields below Doonagore Castle, near Doolin (Figs. 9 and 10); the small sites on George’s Head,

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27 G. U. Macnamara, *J. Roy. Soc. Antq. Ireland*, 31(1901), 210 and ill. p. 349—these references, and the note by T. J. Westropp in the same *Journal* (pp. 433-434), were unfortunately missed by the writer last year when publishing a note on Co. Clare crannogs in this *Journal*, 22(1981), 93-94; Westropp describes one crannog and lists six others not included in my 1981 note.


29 Unpublished, but see Cunningham, *op. cit.*, pp. 83-84; two of the three are marked on O.S. 6-inch scale sheet 8—as small mounds.
Kilkee,\textsuperscript{30} are probably best regarded as of this class, though they, exceptionally but perhaps not uniquely, have gapped rather than completely annular enclosures (Fig. 11).

Although \textit{fulachta fiadh}, now well known in Co. Clare,\textsuperscript{31} are traditionally associated with the Fianna and should perhaps thus be assignable to the Early Iron Age, they are excluded from this discussion on the grounds that all the known archaeological evidence seems to indicate an earlier date for them (personal communication from Diarmaid Ó Drisceoil, M.A., who has recently completed a major thesis on the subject which he is preparing for publication).

\footnote{T. J. Westropp, \textit{op. cit.} (1908), p. 40.}
Fig. 12. Iron spearhead from Inchiquin, near Corofin; before cleaning.  
(Photos: National Museum of Ireland)
From the foregoing it should be clear that there is an ample Early Iron Age monumental heritage in Co. Clare. The artifactual evidence is relatively slight, however, relying as it does on stray, unassociated finds and because of a rather extraordinary dearth of excavation of suitable sites. In fact, there are only seven known certain Early Iron Age artifacts from Clare.

The earliest of these artifacts is probably a 22cm. long iron spearhead "said to have been found in the neighbourhood of Inchquin Lake at the time of the Fergus drainage". A more recent authority locates it somewhat more closely however, stating that it was "found near the lake in the little river which flows into Inchquin Lough, Co. Clare", which would indicate that it was found in the River Fergus (the only river flowing into the lake), in the townland of Nooan, Inchquin or Killinaboy.

This spearhead (Fig. 12) is unusual in having two openings, one on either side of its very prominent and angular midrib, at the widest part of the blade. La Tène spearheads with openings in the blade are not unknown, some known even from La Tène itself, but these two openings are exceptional in that each is inset with bronze which surrounds the edge and also divides the opening in two. The spearhead's socket is short and still retains its single thin iron rivet. Around most of the base of the socket was an incised/hammered fret or key pattern.

While the spearhead is invariably dated to the La Tène period, the unusual shape of its blade, reaching its maximum width so near midway along its length, and its unusual angular midrib, not to mention its fret-like ornament, all hint at other possibilities. Mahr, for instance, had no doubt that these openings in its blade "are the direct heritage of a characteristic type belonging to the late Bronze Age, while if a parallel between the fret on it and on the small bronze javelin-head from near Boho, Co. Fermanagh, can be sustained, as seems plausible, than a Hallstatt background might even be sought for it.

Most certainly La Tène is the only other known Early Iron Age weapon from Co. Clare, a sword found when dredging the River Shannon at Killaloe in 1934. This artifact (Fig. 13) is incomplete and rather poorly preserved but because of its gently bell-shaped bronze hilt-guard and its blade's cross-section (though gently thickening down the centre rather than of true lozenge-shaped cross-section) it can be immediately classified as being a Type A La Tène sword. The upper edges of the rather thick 4cm. long hilt-guard are flanged, clearly to fit onto the bottom of an organic (more likely of bone than wood) quillon. This would

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32 J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland, 30(1900), 265; the caption to an illustration showing this weapon in Macnamara, op. cit., p. 358 suggests, however, that it was "found same time and place" as the Late Bronze Age hoard from nearby Boultaghadine [see G. Eogan, Nih. Munster Antiq. J., 10(1966-67), 67-79, for this hoard], but this seems to be an error.
33 A. Mahr, Proc. Roy. Irish Acad., 42, C(1934), 24. Mahr had, apparently, been in contact with its owner at the time, Mr. Marcus Patterson, son of Mr. Mark or Marcus Patterson of Corofin who owned it at the beginning of the century, and probably had the details as to its place of discovery from him—to someone living in New Zealand, as Mr. Patterson then was, the River Fergus would be describable as a "little river".
34 Although this weapon is usually referred to as from Corofin, it would, in the circumstances, seem more reasonable to henceforward give its provenance as Inchquin.
35 This decoration has unfortunately all but vanished since the spearhead, now in the National Museum of Ireland, was cleaned during the late 1950s or early 1960s.
36 Mahr, op. cit., fig. 5B. This javelin-head differs in shape from the Inchquin one, but likewise has two small openings, albeit triangular, in each wing of its blade.
have been about 1 cm. thick, as can be estimated by the gap between the hilt-guard and the bronze washer which would have been at the base of the organic grip and which is corroded in position onto the rectangular-sectioned tang. This washer is oval in plan and has what appears to be an incised line around its circumference—or, just possibly, this line may be a seam resulting from two washers fused together. Although even approximate absolute dating is difficult for this weapon, a date around the Birth of Christ is probable.

Three other metal (bronze) artifacts of typically La Tène type are known from the county. These comprise two bridle-bits and one bridle-pendant. Both the bridle-bits are from near Corofin and both are now missing. One (Fig. 14) is of Type B, a relatively early type datable probably to about the Birth of Christ. Like the spearhead, this bit belonged at the turn of the century to Mr. Mark or Marcus Patterson of Corofin and was likewise “found in the neighbourhood of Inchiquin Lake at the time of the Fergus drainage.” The second horse-bit was found about 1925 near Corofin. It reportedly had “scroll-work

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41 Reported to me in 1960 by the finder, Mr. James F. Quinn, Claremont House, Clarecastle, Co. Clare.
on it like the ones from Attymon’, Co. Galway, and also is said to have had a slight projection from the central ‘figure-of-eight’ link which the finder believed would have been “to cause pressure in the centre of the horse’s mouth.” The exact nature of this latter feature is unknown and without parallel, but if in fact the bit resembled those from Attymon then it probably belonged to Type E, a very late type. Unfortunately, not realising its antiquity or importance, the finder used it for his own horses until it snapped when a horse bolted—the pieces of the bit were then thrown away.

The bridle-pendant (Fig. 15) is from a bog in Ballyalla, near Lisdoonvarna, and is of Type II, the later of the two identified types. Various suggestions have been put forward as to the function of this artifact-type, none universally accepted—so much so that the principal authority prefers to term them simply ‘Y-shaped pieces’. These uniquely Irish objects have been found with bridle-bits and are clearly to be regarded as horse-harness of some sort, and the writer prefers to regard them as pendants made to be suspended below the horse’s mouth, probably from the bridle-bits, for use as leading-pieces.

Finally, there are two other artifacts from the county which are acceptably La Tène. Both are beehive-shaped quernstones, one from Cohy, near Caran, and the other formerly next to St. Columba’s Church, Glen-columbkille. These are the two most southerly examples of beehive querns, being, in fact, the only two clearly south of a Galway Bay-Dublin line.

As can be seen from the above notes, Co. Clare appears to have a surprisingly rich and varied Early Iron Age monumental heritage, even though at the same period poorly represented artfactually. Many of the field-monuments described fall clearly into an Atlantic Province, notably the large stone forts, particularly Ballykinvarga with its chevaux-de-frise, and perhaps also Moogheane hillfort with its three widely-spaced ramparts. Apart from the Inchquin spearhead, the few identifiable Early Iron Age artifacts are of La Tène type, types which are rarely found in the pseudo-historical Leth Mogha, i.e. south of the Esker Riada, a naturally formed Galway Bay-Dublin dividing line. This gives rise to Caulfield’s interesting suggestion concerning a La Tène Iron Age in Leth Chuinn, north of the line, and a non-La Tène Iron

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42 Howarth, op. cit., p. 29; listed as no. 53 on p. 46 among those “of unknown type”.
43 Ibid., p. 37; listed as no. 29 on p. 47.
44 Ibid., p. 34; for the various suggested functions see pp. 38-39.
46 T. J. Westropp, J. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ireland, 43 (1913), 249-250. As this quern is now missing and thus not identifiable as to its exact type, it is not listed by Caulfield nor included in his distribution maps for types (fig. 25) though marked on his general distribution map (fig. 24a).
Age in Leth Mogha.\textsuperscript{47} Clare is in a rather unique situation \textit{vis-à-vis} the rest of Ireland in this regard, being in Leth Mogha but nonetheless separated from the rest of it by the River Shannon. It is thus in many ways almost as closely linked with Connacht as with the rest of Munster, a geographical peculiarity which might well account for any apparent anomalies.

\textbf{NOTE ADDED IN PRESS}

While the above article was with the printers, Dr. Barry Raftery's excellent and most useful \textit{A Catalogue of Irish Iron Age Antiquities} (2 vols., Marburg 1983) appeared. In it the metal artifacts described in this article are listed as follows: spearhead, no. 283; sword, no. 243; bridle-bits, nos. 14 and 139 respectively; bridle- pendant, no. 198.