Ringfort Morphology and Distribution on the Loop Head Peninsula, County Clare.

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This analysis of ringforts on the Loop Head peninsula indicates that they are largely typical of the country as a whole, though no examples of either cashel or platform types were identified. The location of ecclesiastical sites in areas where ringforts are absent supports the argument that these represent frontier settlements in unpopulated territory. This pattern is a tentative indicator that many of the undated church sites, are genuine foundations of the Early Christian period.

Introduction

The Loop Head peninsula, as defined for the purposes of this study, is comprised of the two civil parishes of Carrigaholt and Cross, which lie in the most extreme south-west corner of county Clare, in the barony of Moyarta, in the west of Ireland (Map 1). This roughly triangular area of land constitutes a peninsula of approximately 26,000 acres, or 40 square miles. The study area is bounded on the north and west by the Atlantic Ocean and to the south by the Shannon estuary. It is an area of great natural beauty with high cliffs running most of the length of its coasts. On the north coast the barrier of cliffs is broken by a mere handful of sheltered inlets, none however giving easy access to the land. The only sheltered harbours are found on the south coast, at Kilbaha, Rinevella and Carrigaholt. The peninsula is characterised by an almost tree-less, low-lying landscape with occasional scrub-bushes and gentle hills, as at Knocknagarhoon, Kilbaha, Moveen and Rehy. This paper aims to examine the corpus of ringforts on the Loop Head peninsula in terms of their morphology, distribution, and function and to make comparisons with other areas where survey information has been quantified.

The earliest history of the study area is linked to that of the Irrus/Irrous, itself part of the larger Corcabaskin region. Thus any understanding of the historical perspective of the Loop Head area must be viewed in this context. Westropp records (Westropp 1908a, 35-6) that “The old name “Irrus” - promontory or peninsula - was used by Mac Grath in the “Wars of Turlough” in 1313, for the district from Knockalough, near Kilmihil out to Loop Head. It lingered in the mouths of the peasantry down to 1839, but, being too extensive and vague for map purposes, was omitted from the survey: it seemed to have got confined to the district west of a line between the creeks of Doonbeg and Poulnisherry …”

Morphology

In all studies of ringfort morphology there is a clear differentiation between univallate and bivallate sites, with the former usually accounting for upwards of 80% of sites. On the Loop Head peninsula 86% (133 ringforts) are univallate. This compares well with evidence from areas such as the Braid and Upper Glenarm valleys of Antrim (85%), southern county Donegal (83%), Mid Roscommon (82%) and in the south-west midlands (81%) (Black 1994, 7; Barrett 1980, 39-51; Herity 1987, 128; Stout 1991, 207). In other surveyed areas this total is slightly lower, such as the Iveragh peninsula (76%) and

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1 This work is based on the author's MA thesis submitted to National University of Ireland, Galway, Chapple 1998. Although more recent work on Irish ringforts has been undertaken since the submission of this thesis, no attempt has been made to update or take account of it here.
in county Louth (69%). Further areas present a higher proportion of univallate sites than observed on the Loop Head peninsula, e.g. the barony of Morgallion in county Meath (90%), portions of county Leitrim (88%), and north Kerry (88%) (Fig. 2) (Brady 1983, 7; Farrelly 1989, 86; Toal 1995, 82; O’Sullivan & Sheehan 1996, 135; Buckley & Sweetman 1991, 152).

When individual ringforts are named on Ordnance Survey six-inch map sheets or are known solely on the basis of a local oral tradition, those of wholly or partly earthen construction are commonly prefixed with the Irish terms Ráth, Lios, or in its anglicised form, ‘Liss;’ and in the case of those of the stone variety, as Caher, Dún, and Cashel. Within the study area some 28 sites are variously named, 14%, of all the various earthworks in the study area. Of this number 23 (82% of named earthworks), are named ‘Liss.’ Three sites (11%) are named ‘Caher’ while one further site, a possible barrow, possesses a similar prefix. Finally, only one ringfort possesses the ‘Rath’ prefix, although Lissnafallinge (115) is also known as Rath an Úisge. While O’Curry may have presumed that the terms Ráth, Dún and Lios were synonymous, it is now accepted that the term Rath denotes the enclosing bank, while Lios, or ‘Liss’ refers to the internal, open, area (Daniel 1952, 73).

![Bar chart showing the distribution of ringforts by height]

**Fig. 1.** Degree to which external banks are exceeded in height by internal ramparts on the Loop Head peninsula (22 bivallate sites in sample, 100%).

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3 Ringforts: Liscoreen (35), Lisboy (42), Lissnacocin (44), Lisguire (47), Lissalupeantry (53), Lisroe (54), Lisnagrove (58), Lisnarradine (62), Lisnaguan (65), Lisheeneranny (66), Lisheena / Lisheenfurrow (69), Lissalougha (72), Lisdaft (76), Lisroe (82), Lissaphurruna / Lissaphurna (85), Lisnagreenaun (87), Lisnemigan (98), Corris (109) (Pl. 4). Lissnafallalge (115). Lissanula (118). Lisroe (144). Lismackadon (153). unclassified enclosures: Lisdandally (165). Destroyed earthworks: Lisdruadhailch (179). Lisroe (186). For folklore associated with Lisdruadhailch see Chapple 1998 Vol. 2, 571.

4 Unclassified earthworks: Cahersaul (166). Cahermahoon (167). Destroyed earthworks: Caherconea (183). Possible barrow: Cahermahoonanna (SMR: CL071-005)

5 The bracketed numbers refer to catalogue entries in Chapple 1998. Copies of this work on PC CD Rom are available from the author.

Fig. 2. Comparison of percentages of univallate ringforts in various parts of Ireland for which data is available.

Within the study area, none of the 155 sites discussed are of wholly stone construction and can be termed as cashels or cahers. However, four sites around the tip of the peninsula bear names containing the ‘caher’ prefix. Unfortunately, the sites of Cahersaul (166) Cahercoolia (183) and Cahercroguaun (167) are all too destroyed to be confidently assigned to the class of ringforts and indeed the remains exhibit no conclusive evidence for a completely stone construction. Instead they are considered as either unclassified enclosures or as destroyed earthworks (see Chapple 1998 Vol. 2, 461-488, Map 4.1). The final site of Cahernaneannma is not in fact a ringfort, but appears to be a possible barrow.

In some excavated examples it has been shown that stones were employed to revet or face earthen banks. However, such facings frequently remain hidden from view until such procedures as excavation are undertaken. Thus in the course of a programme of field survey it is usually impossible to distinguish between ringforts built using such facings and those constructed solely of earth. No stone facings or revetments are visible at any of the sites, though Westropp (1909, 121-3) supposes that there may have been at two sites (Liscroneneen 32 and 33), all traces of which had been removed even before they had been visited by him, in the early part of the 20th century.

On the Loop Head peninsula the maximum internal diameters of ringforts range from 22m (4, 63)(Pl. 1) to 49m (87). The average measurement being 31m (e.g. 127). Thus, the enclosed areas range from 116m$^2$ to 756m$^2$ with 264m$^2$ being the average enclosed area. Within the study area some 41% of ringforts possess internal diameters between 28m and 35.9m. This compares well with 40% of the south-west midlands ringforts in the category from 28m to 35m (Stout 1989, 26-30, 34). Other areas of Ireland return similar results when data is analysed. For example, 63% of ringforts in county Monaghan range between 27m and 39m in diameter (Brindley 1986). However, ringforts from other areas show a marked tendency for smaller internal diameters. Examples of this include the ringforts of the Iveragh peninsula where 65% of sites have diameters between 20m and 30m (O'Sullivan &

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6 SMR: CL071-005. See also Westropp 1898, 411; 1908b, 350; Chapple 1992, 14, footnote 4.
Plate 1. Ringforts on the south coast of the Loop Head peninsula, near Carrigaholt Bay, from the southwest. Lismaguine (65) is centre right, with 64 centre left, 63 in the foreground and Lisheencrony (66) in the right background.

Shechan 1996, 134–5). Other areas produce similarly small results; 23% of ringforts in north Kerry; 27% of sites in Donegal and 29% of sites in the Barony of Ikerrin all exhibit modal internal diameters of between 27m and 31m (Toal 1995, 82; Lacy 1983; Stout 1984, 28). Stout notes that the dimensions given in the Early Irish laws for the residence of a tribal king is 42.56m in internal diameter, among the higher measurements in all areas of Ireland (1997, 16).

It is unlikely that the banks of many ringforts survive to their original height as they have survived over a millennium of natural and manmade denudation. While a number of ringfort banks on the Loop Head peninsula exceed 2m in height, the average is 1.6m (e.g. 106). Indeed the majority of sites fall in the range from 0.2m to 1.9m (79%). By comparison, the average height for ringforts in the south-west midlands is only 0.48m (Op. cit., 17). As a final point in the argument for the social role of ringfort banks it has been stated that occasionally the external banks of bivallate sites are higher than the internal ramparts. Such a feature would remove any

Plate 2. Rock-cut fosse at Lisduff ringfort, Moveen West (76), from the south.
Plate 3. A bivallate ringfort (111) in Querrin townland, from south.

Plate 4. Corlis (109), a univallate ringfort, from the north. An entrance way (2.9m wide) is visible in the eastern (left) portion of the bank.
strategic advantage that the occupants had if forced to fall back to the inner rampart. However, while this latter point may occasionally be the case in Ulster (Mallory & McNeill 1991, 198), there is no evidence to support this from the Loop Head peninsula where the height of the inner banks exceed that of the outer rampart for all 22 bivallate sites (Fig. 1). These results are mirrored in the data from other areas, including north county Roscommon (Keegan 1994, 12. See also Stout 1997, 19).

The external ditch or fosse of a ringfort both provided the material for construction of the bank and the site's primary mode of defence. In many areas of the country field survey does not record evidence for a fosse at all sites. It is likely, however, that excavation of many sites within the study area would result in the discovery of an external fosse, in at least some instances, as at similar sites in other parts of the country (see Brannon 1981-2, 54; Stenberger 1966, 39). However, it has been suggested that some sites were constructed without fosses, though this would have been the most convenient method of acquiring the bank material (Buckley & Sweetman 1991, 152). On the Loop Head peninsula evidence for an external fosse was found at only 44 of the surveyed sites (28%), i.e. 72% of sites appear to be without a ditch. Depths of fosse range from 0.01 m (18, 20), to 3.5 m (65) (Pl. 1), the mean depth being 0.44 m (e.g. 70, 81). The Loop Head area is somewhat unusual when these results are compared to evidence from other areas. In north county Roscommon only 3% of sites lack evidence for an external fosse, while only 36% of ringforts in the south-west midlands lack this feature and 43% of ringforts in county Louth are similarly deficient (Fig. 3) (Keegan 1994, 12; Stout 1991, 152; Buckley & Sweetman ibid). This apparent aberration may be partially explained by the local topography of the Loop Head peninsula where the generally poor soil conditions necessitate the digging of drainage ditches throughout the landscape. In many cases the fosse areas of ringforts have been dug out to add to the local network of drainage. In other instances there is evidence of later field banks and walls having been erected around ringforts to prevent livestock incursions, which may result in concealing evidence of an external fosse. Alternatively, it may be the case that some ringforts are composed of a high stone to earth mixture that would not have resulted in the construction of a fosse. The shallow nature of the soils over much of the Loop Head peninsula may have contributed to the lack of external fosses due to the difficulty of cutting through the underlying bedrock. However, the presence of an external fosse at Lisduff ringfort in Moveen West (76) which is cut directly through the bedrock suggests that when such a feature was required, the necessary technology and manpower was available for its construction (Pl. 2).

![Fig. 3. Comparison of percentages of sites without evidence for external fosses in various parts of Ireland.](image-url)
The corpus of Early Irish laws indicates that the principal dwelling of a tribal king would have been a univallate ringfort. In this context the existence of bivallate and multivallate ringforts would indicate a somewhat higher social status again. In general terms, bivallate ringforts constitute roughly 19% of the total ringfort populations for most areas. In this the Loop Head area is somewhat deficient as only 22 sites (14.19%) are bivallate ringforts, though in some areas the number may fall as low as 6% of the total (Farrelly 1989, figs. 6-8, 25). Stout (Op. cit., 18) argues that this distinction between univallate and bivallate sites '... is itself evidence for a consistent and widespread settlement hierarchy which must mirror a similar social stratification.'

A diagnostic feature of the bivallate ringfort appears to be the presence of an intervening fosse between the internal and external banks, but without a fosse external to the outer bank (Pl. 3). This is the case for the ringforts of the Loop Head peninsula as all 22 bivallate examples possess only an intervening fosse between the two banks. In north county Roscommon none of the four known bivallate sites possess an external ditch (Keegan ibid.). These results appear to be consistent with the evidence from the Early Laws where bivallate ringforts are described as having only one fosse. Suggestions that external fosses may lie buried at a number of bivallate sites are not borne out by excavated evidence (see Brannan 1981-2, 55; O'Kelly 1963, 18-22; Monk 1995, 107). However, other surveyed areas occasionally present evidence for bivallate ringforts with both an intervening and an external fosse. In the south-west midlands one bivallate of the 37 recorded examples possessed such a feature while in county Louth some 22% of all bivallate sites were of this type (Stout ibid.; Buckley & Sweetman ibid.).

Westropp (1911, 229; 1909, 125) notes that at two sites on the Loop Head peninsula there is a '... very curious feature, rare, but occurring elsewhere ...'. At Lisheencreny ringfort (66) (Pl. 1) he describes it as '... a sort of ledge inside the outer ring, with a shallow fosse inside it. Whether this was a fighting platform or was palisaded with a “sonnach” of stakes is not clear.' (Op. cit. 1909). He describes a similar feature at Lisduff ringfort in Moveen West (76) (1908b, 358). At the univallate ringfort of Lisroe in Tullig (144) a feature was recorded along the internal face of the bank which appears to be similar to the banquets described by Westropp. It may be that these peculiarities were stone revetments to the earthwork, now covered by slip from the bank, though excavation would be required to discover their true nature. A possible parallel may be suggested from the ringfort at Garryduff II where a stone revetment was excavated along the inner edge of the bank (O'Kelly 1963).

Entry to a ringfort was usually gained via an undug causeway through the fosse. With the passing of time many of these have become obscured in a variety of ways while in other place the bank may have become gapped and broken down, further clouding the evidence. The entrances, as they stand today, range in width from 2.25m (57) to 5.4m (76). At a number of other earthen ringforts entry features appear to survive but for a variety of reasons cannot be identified with complete certainty. At two sites entrances appear to face north (38 and 57). Westropp (1908b, 360) records that the ringfort of Lissalanula, in Rahona West (118), had a south facing entrance. However, on inspection this feature could not be located and identified as such with certainty. Only one site (13) appeared to possess a west facing entrance. However, the site is in such a ruinous condition that it may be quite misleading to interpret this as the original entrance feature. The remainder of the ringforts in the study area either exhibit no traces of entrance features, or their banks are so broken through, overgrown, or disturbed due to modern activity on the site, as to make any traces of their original entrance orientation completely untraceable. When entrances are clearly visible, however, there appears to have been a clear preference for generally easterly to south-easterly orientations without consideration for how the land lay (Stout 1984, 29, fig. 20)(Pl. 4). Of the Loop Head ringforts only 17 examples (11% of the corpus) could be clearly identified as features contemporary with the primary phase of construction. Of this small sample the majority (11 sites, 65%) face east. Perhaps the finest example of this in the study area is
the ringfort of Lisduff (76) in Movcen West. In county Donegal 41% of entrances face between north-east and south-east; in parts of Leitrim this figure is 55% and 57% for the barony of Small County, Limerick, with 66% for Louth (Barrett 1980, 45; Farrelly 1989, 36-7, fig. 18. Stout 1984; Buckley & Sweetman 1991, 152). In mid Roscommon 72% of entrances lie between east and south while on the Iveragh peninsula the figure is 78% (Herity 1987, 132-3, fig. 30a; O’Sullivan & Sheehan 1996, 135). In the south-west midlands 50% of entrances lie between east and south-east (Stout 1991, 209, fig. 4c). On the loop Head peninsula 71% of entrances lie in this direction, while in north Kerry the figure is 47% (Fig. 4)(Toal 1995, 82). It is generally accepted that such positioning of ringfort entrances was both intended to shield the sites from the prevailing, south-westerly winds and take best advantage of the available sunlight (Stout 1997, 19).

![Graph showing percentage of ringfort orientations](https://example.com/graph.png)

**Fig. 4.** Comparison of percentages of ringforts with generally easterly orientations of entrance features.

The overall diameter of a ringfort is both a measure of the size of its interior and often an indicator of the size and strength of its defences. On the Loop Head peninsula the external diameters of ringforts range from 27m (56) to 69m (25), the mean being 41m (e.g. 21, 66). In the study area 72% of sites possess overall diameters between 29m and 47m, with 30% of ringforts falling between 29m and 38m. This is broadly comparable to data from the south-west midlands where 83% of sites possess maximum overall diameters between 30m and 60m with 37% of sites lying between 40m and 49m (Stout 1991, 209, fig. 4b). Many authors have noted that the internal living area of a ringfort may regularly comprise less than 60% of the overall area (cf. Ó Riordáin 1942, 1979, 30; Herity 1987, 131-2, fig. 29b; Farrelly 1989, 27-34, figs. 13-5). Stout (1991, 217. See also Warner 1988, 47-68) argues that such an increase in the ramparts of a ringfort, in the absence of a symmetrical increase in the internal living space "...demonstrates either a greater need for defence or an effort to display the status of the occupant." On the Loop Head peninsula internal diameters make up between 21% (150) and 97% (125) of the overall diameters of ringforts (Fig. 5). It may be observed from the histogram below that when bivallate sites are plotted individually their internal diameters account for a significantly smaller percentage of their overall diameters than for univallate sites as a whole. The internal areas of bivallate ringforts account for between 21% to 59% (19) with all of the sites in the range from 20% to 30% being bivallate.
A subset of the ringfort type is the ‘raised rath’ or platform ringfort. Such a ringfort may be defined as one who’s interior is significantly raised above the ground level, as opposed to sites where there in only a slight increase in internal height (Avery 1991-2, 125). In other areas of Ireland they can account for between 15% and 19% of the corpus of ringforts (Buckley & Sweetman 1991; Stout 1989, 207, 210). However, on the Loop Head peninsula there are no definite recorded examples of this type. However, two sites listed as unclassified enclosures may have been examples of this type in the study area. These are sites in Killtrelig (169) and in Moyarta East (170). In both cases the sites appear to have been ringforts later converted for use as graveyards and today so mutilated by burials as to preclude their listing as definite sites. Nonetheless, a number of the Loop Head ringforts exhibit a certain amount of internal build-up. In the majority of cases the question as to whether this accretion of material was deliberate or natural is unascertainable without excavation. At eight sites (5%) the internal area is slightly raised above the present field level. In these instances it is likely that successive periods, or a single period, of continued habitation led to a natural accumulation of earth on the interiors. Of particular interest are four sites (3%) all of which are built on gently rising ground. On these ringforts the down slope portions of the interiors are raised from between 0.5m to 0.75m. It is probable that this was intended to furnish a relatively level surface area for habitation. In three of these examples (4, 6, and 98) the build-up of the down slope portions of the sites was towards the south, while in the final case (59) the aspect of the land was towards the south-east. This form of activity may indicate that a southern aspect was preferable to the builders of ringforts and special effort was occasionally taken to allow such a location to be utilised. In only one case does the interior of a ringfort (97) actually appear to be somewhat concave and lower than the adjacent land-surface, though this may be due to later activity on the site than any original feature of the site.
Internal features

On the Loop Head peninsula, five sites appear, either from field-survey or from the published literature, to have had some form of internal features, some of which may have been contemporary with the primary construction and occupational phases of the sites. At two sites there may have been traces of huts, though they are now much disturbed. At Lismaguine, in Lisheencrony, (65) the remains of two house sites are recorded near the north-eastern corner of the enclosure, though today they appear only as an indistinct hollow (Westropp 1909, 125). Westropp (Op. cit. 121-3) also notes 'some slight traces of enclosures in the garth' of Liscroneen in Doonaha West (32), again these appear to have been destroyed. Another site, Lisanoon in Kilbaha North (44) has L-shaped banks internally, while the mounds and banks at sites at sites (20) and (52) are very overgrown and no claims may be made for their antiquity. Finally, the stone mounds at site (23) are probably only the result of field-clearance. Only excavation could possibly establish the true antiquity of these internal features but some, at least, may date to the initial period of construction and habitation of these sites.

Although no souterrains associated with ringfords are known within the Loop Head peninsula there is evidence supporting the former existence of four examples. Evidence for a souterrain at Lismadine, in Lisheencrony (62), comes from the ITH MSS (Henchy 1943, Moyarta Parish). It notes that 'the local people remembered a souterrain in this fort. It is now closed up as it was used as a dumping ground.' The 3rd edition OS 6" sheet marks a 'Cave' at a ringfort in Lisheenfurrogh (71). Although the souterrain is no longer visible, its former existence is vouched for by a local landowner who claims that it had been open until the 1940s or 1950s at which time it collapsed. A further souterrain is noted by Westropp (1909, 126) in connection with the ringfort of Lissynunna/Lissaphunna (85) and its nameless neighbour in Moyarta East (86). It was discovered between these two sites in the course of ploughing but was quickly closed again for fear of a supernatural reprisal. Although no scientifically recorded information exists for this souterrain, it may be speculated that this represents the remains of a later, unenclosed habitation. Finally, the OS Name Book gives the translation of the name of Lissanoon, in Kilbaha North (44) as 'Lios an Uaimh', or 'the fort of the cave' which may suggest the former existence of a souterrain on that site (OSNB: Kilballyowen Parish).

A number of ringfort excavations have produced no evidence of human occupation and the sites are seen as having functioned exclusively as cattle enclosures (see Proudfoot 1961, 106). On occasion disused ringfords may have been reused as cattle enclosures, though it is sometimes unclear as to whether this activity was of Early Christian date (Dickinson & Waterman 1960. See also Mytum 1992, 181; Proudfoot op. cit. 95; McCormick 1995, 33-4). As none of the ringfords on the Loop Head peninsula have been excavated, the theory that some may have been used as cattle enclosures cannot be demonstrated. However, Westropp (1909, 126) suggests that the unnamed ringfort in Moyarta East (86) may have acted as a livestock enclosure for the nearby ringfort of Lissynunna/Lissaphunna (85). Two further, possible examples of a ringfort which acted as a cattle enclosure are found in neighbouring townlands in the west of the peninsula. In the first instance, a small ringfort (73) in the townland of Lissalougha which is conjoined to a larger site (72) on its south-west side may have had such a function. Similarly, in Cloughansavauin townland, a small univallate site approximately 175m to the south-east of a large, bivallate ringfort may have also functioned as a stock enclosure for the larger earthwork.

Features that post-date the main use of the sites

After their eventual abandonment many ringforts in all parts of Ireland were, at least partially, protected by a body of local superstition, folklore and cultural taboo associated with 'Fairies' or 'The Little People.' In this respect the Loop Head peninsula is no exception and many items of folklore have been recorded by the present author (Chapple 1994). These are generally tales of supernatural retribution
for disturbing the monuments. The modern waning of these traditional beliefs, coupled with the fact that ringforts are generally sited in good quality agricultural land, has regularly led to their complete or partial destruction.

Despite such disincentives, ringforts were frequently reused for other purposes after they had been abandoned. Among the most common reutilisations of ringforts was the conversion of a site to act as a children’s burial ground or Cilleen. Such sites were commonly used for the burial of children who died before a Roman Catholic baptism could be performed. For example, in the barony of Dunmore, county Galway, 56% (29 examples) of recorded children’s burial grounds occur on ringforts (Crombie 1987-88, 151). In other areas there is evidence for their use for the inhumation of criminals and strangers to an area, whose religion was unknown or uncertain.

The reuse of ringforts as children’s burial grounds is generally dated to the 19th century, but there is frequently evidence of the sites being used as late as the 1960s. However, in many rural areas cultural taboo prevails, preventing such events from being discussed. Within the Loop Head peninsula one ringfort in Kilcloher (51) and one destroyed earthwork in Killinn (187) were occasionally used for these purposes. Two unclassified enclosures which may have been ringforts may also be mentioned at this point as having been reused as regular burial grounds. These are sites in the townlands of Kilrereillig (169) and Moyarta East (170). O’Curry (O’Donovan & O’Curry 1997, 122) records that there was a children’s burial ground in the townland of Furroor Lower. However, of the two ringforts located in this townland (42 & 43), neither exhibits any features of such a reuse, nor could any local information be gleaned on this point.

Many ringforts in Ireland also possess the remains of 19th century agricultural use in their interiors. Traces of these fossilised cultivation ridges, or ‘Lazy Beds,’ are visible traversing the interiors of five ringforts on the Loop Head peninsula. In the absence of contradictory evidence, these remains are commonly dated to the mid 19th century, specifically to the period of the Irish potato famine from 1846 to 1848 when the crops failed and the characteristic cultivation ridges were left undug. However, there is no conclusive evidence on this matter.

One ringfort on the Loop Head peninsula was reused in a rather novel, and perhaps unique, way. During the period of the so-called ‘Black and Tans,’ from 1920 to 1921, a portion of a ringfort bank in Doonah East (31) was dug away to facilitate the insertion of a small wooden structure with a thatched roof. The structure was buried under spoil dug from the bank and the whole area planted with trees and brambles. The purpose of this edifice was to house rebel guerrillas and prevent their discovery by the authorities.

The other forms of modern disturbance to ringforts are more mundane in character. The most obvious form of disturbance to ringfort sites within the study area has been the building of field-banks, abutting, cutting through, or running around sites. A total of 113 sites (73%) are affected by this to some extent. It must be considered that the lines of some of these banks, i.e. those abutting the banks, if not portions of their fabric, may date to the constructional phase of the site. However, as the field survey upon which this research is based was non-intrusive in nature, no evidence of this could be ascertained.

The banks and interiors of 19 (12%) sites have been partially compromised by the construction of modern roadways, while three sites (2%) are slightly disturbed by the inclusion of telegraph poles on their enclosing features. In four cases (3%) the site has been disturbed or damaged by the dumping of building spoil, domestic or farm waste in the interior or around its perimeter. At a further two sites (1%) Westropp (1909, 125; 1908b, 358) variously records instances of treasure-hunting which presumably affected the archaeological strata of the sites.

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Distribution
Westropp (1902, 586-8) was among the first to attempt to assess the nation-wide distribution of ringforts in the Irish landscape. Since that time the importance of site distribution as an indicator of settlement density and social structure has been both well understood and much debated. Among the obstacles which have blighted ringfort studies has been the question of the reliability of the surviving monuments in terms of the original settlement pattern. For example, Barrett’s study (Barrett 1980; 1982; 1995; See also O’Flanagan 1981) of cropmarks in various areas, including county Louth and the Barrow valley in south county Kildare highlights the deficiencies of using the Ordnance Survey maps as a basis for ringfort distributions. However, such results cannot be accepted for all parts of Ireland as there appears to be great variation in the rate of pre-Ordnance Survey destruction of sites. Indeed, Stout (1997, 49) sees Barrett’s study of the Barrow valley as especially unrepresentative of ringfort destruction rates as the area was selected primarily on the basis of its abundance in cropmarks. In other areas aerial photography has added to the numbers of known ringforts, though not to the point of radically altering the general pattern of known sites. Stout’s analysis of the Sites and Monuments Record indicates that the analysis of aerial photography has added to the numbers of known ringforts by approximately 10%. While the numbers for Leinster are c.4% more than for other parts of the country, Stout argues that such evidence, coupled with an analysis of Early Christian sites discovered during the excavation of gas pipelines, indicates that the pre-Ordnance Survey distribution of ringforts is generally accurate and reliable (Stout op. cit., 50. See also Stout 1986-7). However, it is still impossible to calculate the precise numbers of ringforts originally constructed in Ireland, or indeed exactly how many survive on the landscape.

Given these limitations, there are currently 45,119 ringforts on the island of Ireland, of which 41% have been positively identified. From this evidence Stout has calculated that the mean density of ringforts for Ireland is 0.55 sites per km². However, there are great regional variations in this figure. For example, in zones of low density such as county Donegal the figure is 0.15/km² while in county Kildare the average ringfort density is 0.18/km² and 0.19/km² for county Dublin. Counties with a high ringfort density include Roscommon (1.07/km²), Limerick (1.10/km²) and Sligo (1.61/km²). On a regional basis, the zones with the lowest density of ringforts are north-west Ulster and the majority of Leinster. At the opposite end of the scale, the areas of highest density include north Munster, east Connaught/north-west Leinster and east Ulster. In the West Clare region the average ringfort density is 1.16/km², though the density for the Loop Head peninsula is significantly higher at 1.44 sites per km².

The West Clare zone, as defined by Stout comprises the western portion of county Clare and two baronies in south county Galway (Stout 1997, 60). He observes that this very high overall density is achieved despite large gaps in the distribution (Op. cit. 97). The largest of these areas is the upland bog zone around Slieveecallanan and Ben Dash with thinly settled parts of this region include the low-lying karstic landscape on the borders of counties Galway and Clare. However, the most densely settled area in the region is from Ballyvaughan to Ennis where the density is 1.70 ringforts per km². As noted above, the ringfort density for the Loop Head peninsula is especially high and analysis of Stout’s distribution map for the area shows it to be a relatively discrete area, confined to the west of the rivers which flow north into Doonbeg and south into Poulnasherry bay (See Stout 1997, 60). This area is a low lying (0-15m OD) boggy region with a number of small lakes, including Tullaher and Moanmore. This distributional pattern corresponds largely with Westropp’s definition of the Irrus, or Irritis, cited above.

Ringfort distribution on the Loop Head peninsula shows a number of interesting features both in terms of concentrations and absences of sites (Map 2). The main grouping of sites, especially bivallate ringforts, is concentrated on the central portion of the peninsula from the townland of Cross, east to Carrigaholt and north to Carrawnaweelaun and Trusklieve. The central portion of this area is located in the shallow valley of the Moyarta river. The northern portion of this general grouping appears to be
centred around the gentle slopes of Moveen hill and Knocknagarhoon hill. The southern portion of his grouping represents a small number of ringforts located below the summit of a small hill in Rahona West (c.24m OD). To the east of this area there is an absence of ringforts and other forms of Early Christian activity, from the townland of Breaghva, moving east through the northern portion of Lisheenfurroo and Doonaha West. The majority of this area is now reclaimed, though marginal, land, but on the 1st edition of the Ordnance Survey maps this area is designated as marsh and is formed of the Allen series of peats and the Abbeyfeale (non-peaty phase) of gleys, neither of which are particularly agriculturally productive (Finch et al. 1971, map 1). It would seem that this area of bogland was in existence during the Early Christian period and was avoided by the builders of ringforts (See Chapple 1998 ). To the north of this bogland zone ringforts are located along the generally south facing slopes of Moveen hill. At the eastern extremity of the ‘Breaghva bogland zone’ there is a distinct grouping of ringforts along the sides of the Doonaha river valley. As similar avoidance of bogland may be postulated as the reason for the abandonment of the northern portion of the townland of Querrin, where the distribution of ringforts is chiefly coastal. The distribution of ringforts to the south-west of the Moyarta river valley, in the townlands of Kilcloher, Rehy East and West is chiefly located along the north-facing slopes of Rehy hill, possibly in an attempt to avoid the heavier or marshier soil of the Cloghanbeg river valley. In the southern portions of the townlands of Clougaconda, Feeard, Quilly and Oughterard there appears to be a similar avoidance of this same river valley bottom. In the northern portions of these townlands there is an apparent avoidance of the top of the central ridge of higher land which runs through this portion of the peninsula, with a number of ringforts located on the very gentle north-facing slopes of this ridge. The most westerly portion of the peninsula is largely devoid of ringforts, again possibly due to the avoidance of bogland. A similar avoidance of bogland by the builders of ringforts was also noted by Farrelly in parts of county Leitirin (Farrelly 1989, figs. 22, 52 & 56).

However, other areas devoid of ringforts cannot be explained simply in terms of avoidance of marginal land and appear to be ‘black holes’ in the distributional pattern (See Groube 1981). Indeed, it has been suggested (Ó Corráin 1972, 49) that the expansion of agriculture indicated in the pollen diagrams from around 400 AD was such that pressure on available land resulted in the development of laws relating to trespass around 700 AD. In this context, where agricultural land was at a premium, the absence of ringforts from areas of suitable soil requires explanation. Possibly the most striking of these gaps in the distributional pattern is centred on the townland of Kilballyowen. In this case the distributional pattern of ringforts runs up to the borders of Oughterard townland to the west and to the borders of Cross townland to the east, with the majority of Kilballyowen townland being devoid of ringforts. If a distribution map of the ecclesiastical centres is added to that of the ringforts is immediately apparent that the church site of Kilballyowen lies directly at the heart of this zone devoid of ringforts (Maps 2 & 3) The evidence for the existence of this site before c.1500AD is sparse, thought it appears that the surviving church may have been the centre of a monastic community on the basis of potential earthworks to the north of the site. In the lack of definite evidence for a date in the Early Christian period, contemporary with the building of ringforts it is impossible to be authoritative on this point. However, owing to the lack of ringforts and other Early Christian settlement in its immediate vicinity it may be postulated that the large part of the townland of Kilballyowen was ecclesiastically controlled land, possibly worked by hereditary secular tenants, or manais (See Hurley 1982, 384). A similar situation may be postulated for the churches of Teampul Sheorlais/Teampall Shearlaís and Teampallanard, in the townland of Kilcredaun, and the churches of Tempelenaave, in Ross, and Kilcoan/Kilquane, in Moreen, where the ecclesiastical centres are separated from the general focus of ringfort distribution by an unpopulated area, possibly

16 In Map 3 ecclesiastical centres are given with their SMR designation. Where a townland name is identical to that of the monastic site, it is not duplicated. For a review of the history of the ecclesiastical centres on the Loop Head peninsula, see Chapple 1998 Vol. 1, 153-7.
representing land under the control of these foundations. The church of Kilcrony, in Liskeencrony, appears to fit this general scheme, though possessing a much smaller land holding as it is bordered to the east by a number of ringforts and some distance to the north by the Breaghva ‘bogland zone.’

Ecclesiastical centres which have been listed as possible sites are more difficult to fit into this model of Early Christian settlement on the Loop Head peninsula. For example, the graveyards of Kileashen, Killinny, and Kiltrellig along with Templemeagh, in Querrin, are all either surrounded by ringforts or have sites in close proximity. Similarly, the possible church of Moyarta is also encompassed by ringforts and appears to have been constructed on what may have been a ringfort. While this does not necessarily imply that the site was not an ecclesiastical centre of the Early Christian period, it would appear to give circumstantial corroboration to Westropp’s view (1912, 109, 111) that it was a church site, though one constructed after 1302. Cody’s (1989, 87-8, 236-7, figs. 8-8a) survey of the barony of Athenry has identified one such area devoid of ringfort settlement, which may have been in church ownership. Murphy’s analysis (1992, 369-76) of Early Christian settlement in county Louth reveals a similar situation where ecclesiastical enclosures are found in areas of low ringfort density. However, such results are somewhat at variance from other areas of the country. For example, the densest areas of ringfort settlement in counties Roscommon and east Galway correspond with the highest concentrations of ecclesiastical enclosures while the peat-free areas of west Galway, north-west Mayo and Achill which have few ringforts have correspondingly few Early Christian religious sites (Swan 1983, 277).
McErlean's survey of parts of Antrim, to the north of Lough Neagh and east of the Lower Bann indicated that ringforts were located in loose groupings throughout the study area. In this distributional pattern 29 out of 30 ecclesiastical sites were located on the edges of these groups, in clear isolation from the ringfort settlement (1982, 6-15). From this analysis McErlean suggested that other areas which were devoid of settlement remained wooded until the end of the 8th century (Op. cit., 28). Similar conditions were also postulated for parts of west Cork where it was suggested that three major areas which were devoid of ringforts were covered in pine forests during the Early Christian period (Fahy 1969).

When the overall distributional pattern of Early Christian settlement on the Loop Head peninsula is considered, a somewhat different model may be proposed. Such an hypothetical model is based on what may be termed 'negative' influences (Fig. 6). In the first instance the distribution of settlement is controlled by the primary physical constraints of the landscape. On the Loop Head peninsula the most obvious constraint is that of the coastline which has a primary influence on settlement location in terms of the 'edge effect' (See Chapple 1998 Vol. 1, 169ff). Other landscape features which may play a limiting role on ringfort distribution include steep sided valleys or ravines which would make the construction of ringforts either immensely difficult, if not impossible. Secondary physical constraints to the distribution pattern are not as insurmountable as the former, and may involve a subordinate economic factor. On the Loop Head peninsula the chief factor in this category would appear to be the presence of large tracts of bogland which would have been unsuitable for tillage and for possibly unusable for pasture for large parts of the year. Indeed, the very high water table may have made these areas unfavourable to ringfort builders as a well drained site was often preferred.
As discussed above, there seems to be a marked absence of secular settlement in the vicinity of ecclesiastical centres. It may be suggested that this feature represents the social power of these establishments in that they could control large areas of the landscape for their own uses and compel secular settlement to avoid these areas. Another factor that may have worked in a similar way includes the presence of political divides. However, no such divide may be satisfactorily proposed on the Loop Head peninsula at this time. One final factor which may be suggested is the influence of superstition which may have acted as a mental limiting factor to the pattern of ringfort settlement. While no definite evidence may be presented for this assertion, it is possible that in some instances the secondary physical constraint of bogland may have developed into a social constraint which may be defined as superstition. On the Loop Head peninsula this may be tentatively postulated, based on the evidence of the townland of Breaghva. Westropp (1909, 122) gives the meaning of the name as 'place of wolves' and suggests that the area was largely deserted. In such a context a body of superstition could easily have developed, adding an extra social force to the existing physical constraint. Thus it may be argued that ringforts were constructed within this postulated framework of avoidance of physically unfavourable or socially unacceptable areas and the seeking out of advantageous sites. Analysis has shown that the 'positive' constraints influencing ringfort distribution is based on a complex of diverse factors, of which space does not allow a full discussion (See Chapple 1998 Vol. 1, 135-251). At this point it must suffice to say that among the most important of these determinants is the desire for location close to ecclesiastical centres. However, it appears from the analysis that the churches in this area possessed large land holdings, effectively creating 'exclusion zones' around these establishments. This pattern has been noticed in a number of areas, including west mid-Antrim, Morgallion, county Meath, and the south-west midlands (See McErlean 1982, 6-15; Brady 1983, 9; Stout 1997, 102, fig. 30). In the case
of west mid-Antrim, McErlean (Op. cit. 41-3) explained it in terms of areas which remained wooded until the end of the 8th century. However, in the absence of confirming palaeoecological research, this interpretation is difficult to accept for the Loop Head peninsula study area. Instead, similar to Brady’s analysis (Op. cit., 19-24) of the barony of Morgallion, this pattern may represent a higher level of arable farming being carried out on large estates around the monasteries. It is possible to see the ultimate origin of this distributional pattern in frontier settlements or ‘pioneer foundations’ in unpopulous territory. In this context, it may be suggested that the Early Christian ecclesiastical centres of the Loop Head peninsula represent the earliest settlement in this area in a period following the ‘Iron Age lull,’ after c.400AD, and acted as foci for secular settlement at a slightly later date. Such a hypothesis fits well with other research indicating that ecclesiastical centres were regularly founded in deserted areas devoid of contemporary settlement (Doherty 1985, 52). A similar solution has been suggested for the low density of ringforts in the south of county Louth which are attributed to secondary settlement around 6th century monastic foundations (Murphy 1992, 373). This is of interest as the only evidence of an Early Christian foundation date for any of the ecclesiastical centres on the Loop Head peninsula is that of Teampul Sheorlais/Teampall Shearlais, in the townland of Kilcredaun which is believed to have been founded by St. Caritan, around 550AD (Westropp 1900, 167).  

![Diagram](image)

**Fig. 6.** Proposed model of Early Christian settlement based on analysis of distributional patterns on the Loop Head peninsula.

17 In this context, the local tradition that the Loop Head area was devoid of churches for some period after the introduction of Christianity may have some grain of truth to it.
Summary & Conclusions

The analysis of ringfort data from many parts of the country indicates that sites on the Loop Head peninsula are largely typical of the country as a whole. In morphological terms, the average internal diameter is 31m, equatable with evidence from other areas as is the average recorded overall diameter of 41m. However, the numbers of univallate ringforts (86%) compared to bivallate sites (14%) for the study area is slightly above those from other surveyed areas. Despite the evidence of a number of named sites, there are no ringforts on the Loop Head peninsula of cashel type i.e. of a completely stone construction. Significantly fewer ringforts in the Loop Head area exhibit evidence for an external fosse (28%), compared to other parts of the country. However, this may be related to modern agricultural concerns with which has resulted in the digging out of many such features to provide better drainage.

While no definite examples of the ‘raised rath’ type of ringfort are known from the Loop Head peninsula, a number of sites do exhibit evidence for the deposition of material to provide a level internal surface for sites built on a slope. A relatively unusual feature has also been tentatively identified at two sites in the study area which may be the remains of a stone revetment to the internal edge of the bank.

In conclusion it may be suggested that the examination of the interaction of Early Christian monastic foundations with the pattern of secular settlement appears to confirm the previous hypothesis that these ecclesiastical sites represent frontier settlements in unpopulated territory, possibly from the mid-sixth century onwards. The repeated occurrence of this pattern of large monastic estates and what are described as ‘exclusion zones’ to secular settlement, has been taken as a tentative indicator that many of the surviving church sites, for which neither definite historical nor archaeological information exists, are genuine foundations of the Early Christian period.

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