Was Desmond Castle, Adare, erected on a Ringfort?

By ETIENNE RYNNE

Desmond Castle (Fig. 1) is probably the earliest of the many famous buildings at Adare. It was built, probably by Geoffroi de Morreis, or Morisco, very early in the 13th century. Writers on Desmond Castle all seem to be unanimous that it was apparently built on the site of an earlier ringfort. According to Leask the castle builders deepened the fosse around the fort and connected it with the nearby River Maigue, thus keeping it full of water and changing its character into that of a Norman moat.

FIG. 1. Plan of Desmond Castle, Adare. (From Leask, Irish Castles, by courtesy of Dundalgan Press).

1 Td. Adare, par. Adare, bar. Coshma, Co. Limerick. O.S. 6 inch sheet 21, 38 cm. from West and 19 cm. from North.

2 Leask, Irish Castles, (1941), 24-5.
Other statements on the matter include: "the Keep and the inner Ward evidently occupy the site of an ancient Rath which in prehistoric times commanded the passage of the river, as did the Castle afterwards, the nature of numerous finds in the moat and elsewhere about the Castle plainly show this: the present moat seems to have been nearly identical with that of the rath, and the inner ward accommodates itself closely to its circular plan" and "The inner court (no less by its plan than by the objects found in it) was an early ring-fort."

It is the intention of this paper to re-examine this question, taking into consideration the objects found at the site, with particular reference to the weapons and related objects, most of which are at present preserved in the City of Limerick Public Museum.

About 1845, Desmond Castle underwent considerable repairs, at which time portion of the moat was cleaned out and in 1864 further cleaning was undertaken. This cleaning appears to have been confined to the part of the moat around the southern half of the inner ward and to the river bank where it runs along the castle walls. All the finds to be discussed below probably came from these two places, except one, the probable fetter, which was found in a dungeon-like cell in the north-eastern corner of the keep.

The objects in the Limerick Museum known or reputed to be from Desmond Castle includes two single-edged iron daggers, an iron spearhead, an iron axehead, a fragment of a wooden sword-like object, a wooden bow (Figs. 2-5), at least three iron keys, several sherds of glazed pottery, and portion of what may have been an iron fetter. Other finds, now apparently missing, include an unidentified object claimed to have been made from the antler of the extinct giant Irish deer (Megaceros hibernicus), a pointed object made of antler, portion of an iron chain, an iron knife, and a fragment of decorated leather.

Lord Dunraven, when discussing the finds from the moat of Desmond Castle, mentions only one of the two iron daggers (Fig. 2, no. 1). It is a fairly well preserved single-edged knife-dagger of Early Medieval type. At present it is 49.5 cm. long with a blade 41.2 cm. long, but it appears to have been originally about 2 cm. longer. The blade has a thick triangular cross-section and is 3.1 cm. wide at its widest part. The tang is roughly square in cross-section.

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6 I wish to take this opportunity to thank the Thomond Archaeological Society and the City Librarian, Miss B. Tanigan, for permission to examine these objects.
7 Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 129-130; fig. 26, no. 2.
FIG. 2. Two single-edged iron knife-daggers.

The second knife-dagger is of much the same type (Fig. 2, no. 2). It is in very poor condition, now lacking at least half of its blade. At present it is 34.7 cm. long with a blade 17 cm. long, of triangular cross-section and 3.5 cm. wide at its widest part. The tang is rectangular in cross-section and at its end is a knob-like iron pommel, 4.3 cm. long and 3.2 cm. in greatest thickness.
Although long single-edged iron weapons are known from pre-Norman times, notably the Viking sax or single-edged sword, none conforms to the narrow, straight-sided type of the two Adare daggers. In Early Medieval times, however, such weapons were very common and the Adare specimens clearly date from this period. There are several varieties of Early Medieval daggers, but without their hilts it is not easy to distinguish between them. It is even difficult to separate the military from the civilian types, although as a general rule the latter class tend to be single-edged. The two daggers from Adare are, therefore, more likely to belong to the civilian than to the military class.

Despite the apparently direct descent of the single-edged Early Medieval dagger from the short sax of the Viking Period, it seems to have been some time before it reached the stage of the long, slender, straight-sided type exemplified by the Adare specimens. Daggers, both military and civilian, were used in the 12th and 13th

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**FIG. 3. Iron spearhead and iron axehead.**

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centuries but do not seem to have become common until the late 14th and the 15th centuries when they became an essential part of a man's personal equipment. It would seem most probable, therefore, that the two Adare knife-daggers date from this period.

The iron spearhead is described by Dunraven as being from the moat of Desmond Castle (Fig. 3, no. 1). It is in good condition and has a shouldered blade with thickened middle rather than a lozenge-shaped cross-section; the shoulders are very low on the blade. The socket is well-made and on either side near its base it has a rivet-hole, one of which still retains portion of an iron rivet. It is 23.4 cm. long with a blade 15.5 cm. long and 4.6 cm. wide at the widest part.

The Adare spearhead is the only object from Desmond Castle which can with near-certainty be described as a military weapon (although it should be borne in mind that spears were often used in the chase), and it is also the only object which might, perhaps, be dated to Viking times if it had been found in isolation. This spearhead resembles fairly closely those of Petersen's Viking Type G, dated by him to the 10th and 11th centuries, and is obviously closely related to them. Other Irish spearheads related to this Viking type can, however, be dated from particular features to the Early Medieval Period and there is, therefore, no reason why the Adare specimen should not be dated to about the same period as the two iron knife-daggers. In the writer's opinion the circumstances of its finding argue in favour of the late dating.

The third iron object from the moat of Desmond Castle described and illustrated by Dunraven is a rather large axehead of "bearded" type (Fig. 3, no. 2). It has one unusual feature in that the cutting-edge has the appearance of having been made separately and then welded on to the rather long and narrow neck. The "eye" or shaft-hole is almost tubular, but its lower edges project downwards into a curved base for the "cheeks." It has a very thick back which shows signs of hammering or of having been used as a hammer. When viewed from above this axehead is slightly asymmetrical. It is 19.2 cm. long with a blade 11.5 cm. wide at the cutting-edge.

Although described by Dunraven as a "battle-axe," the thick hammer-like butt of the Adare axehead is a good a priori reason for believing that it is a woodsman's tool rather than a weapon. Commenting on this axehead, Lord Dunraven says that "Dr. Petrie has a similar one in his collection found in a crannog, and probably of the ninth or tenth century." Although axeheads of "bearded" type (i.e. with a pronounced downward curve of the lower edge of the blade) were known from Roman times on the Continent and also from Viking times, they only became relatively common in Early Medieval times, particularly towards the close of the period. These later axeheads are all heavy, solid implements, generally with thick hammer-butts, of the same type as the Adare axehead. Close dating of this type of axehead is

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9 Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 129-130; fig. 26, no. 1.
10 Petersen, De Norske Vikingsverd, (1919), 29.
11 Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 129-130; fig. 26, no. 3.
difficult but there is every reason to believe that the Adare axehead dates from approximately the same period as the other iron objects already discussed.

Lord Dunraven illustrated and described in some detail a wooden sword-like implement from the mud bottom of the moat\textsuperscript{14} (Fig. 4, inset). This object was 1 foot 6 inches long and had a handle 4 inches long and 1\frac{1}{8} inches wide. Dunraven’s illustration shows it to have had V-shaped shoulders, a pommel triangular in shape, and a single hole through the blade which appears to have been an accidental rather than an intentional feature. The wood, he believed, was of oak “and quite black.” The fragment at present in the Limerick Museum (Fig. 4) bears only a superficial resemblance to that described and illustrated by Dunraven. Although the wood has been identified as of oak (\textit{Quercus}),\textsuperscript{15} it is not black in colour. Furthermore it corresponds neither in size nor in shape with the relevant portion of Dunraven’s illustration, having sloping shoulders, a T-shaped pommel, a handle 14 cm. (5\frac{1}{8} ins.) long and 5.8 cm. (2\frac{3}{8} ins.) wide, and two rectangular holes through its blade, both of which appear to be intentional. As the descriptions and illustrations supplied by Lord Dunraven are, in all other instances, accurate, it seems more than likely that the “wooden sword” described by him and the fragment at present in the Limerick Museum are not one and the same object.

The wooden sword-like fragment can hardly be termed a weapon nor, in the present state of our knowledge, can a use be assigned to it with any degree of accuracy. Several sword-like objects of wood are known from Ireland, some of which can,

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 131-2; fig. 27.
\item I wish to thank Miss Maura Scannell, Natural History Division, National Museum of Ireland, for identifying the wood of this, and of the following object to be described, for me.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
apparently, be classed as weaver's swords while there are others of less certain purpose but which may possibly have served as sword-makers' models or, perhaps, as toys. Some wooden beetles used in laundering clothes are also somewhat sword-like, particularly in their handles, and the Adare fragment may possibly have been part of such an object. The two rectangular holes through the blade of the Adare fragment are enigmatical. Possible parallels exist in the triangular hole through the end of the blade of a decorated weaver's sword from Littleton Bog, Leigh, Co. Tipperary, and more particularly in another decorated weaver's sword, from Clonmelly Bog, Drumullan, Co. Clare, which has two holes through its blade, a V-shaped one at its end and a square one near its handle. The decoration on these weaver's swords suggests a date of about A.D. 1000 for the former and somewhat later for the latter.  

When discussing the "wooden sword" from the moat of Desmond Castle, Lord Dunraven quotes Dr. George Petrie as saying that it "is very old, say about the eighth or ninth century." Petrie's reasons for suggesting such an early date for it are not at all clear and probably were to a great extent influenced by his early dating of the iron axehead from the same site (see above). Neither the "wooden sword" illustrated by Dunraven nor the fragment in the Limerick Museum has features which would enable any attempt at a close dating for either, unless the holes through the blade of the fragment could be considered valid reasons for dating it by comparison with the ornate weaver's swords mentioned above. Even should this fragment date from so early a period it would not seriously militate against the argument that all the other objects from Desmond Castle are contemporaneous and date probably from Early Medieval times because, as already explained, it is somewhat doubtful if it is from the site at all. 

In the Limerick Museum are two fragments of a wooden bow on one of which is a label reading: Castle 1884. This object (Fig. 5), therefore, also comes from Desmond Castle, almost certainly from the moat although just possibly from the river bed alongside the Castle walls which was also "excavated" as Dunraven's book was passing through the press. Wherever found, it probably turned up too late to be included by Lord Dunraven in his book as nowhere does he mention such an object. The two fragments join but, even so, do not form the complete bow as portion of one end is missing. The complete bow, however, does not appear to have ever been much longer and probably only about 10-15 cm. of it are missing. The present total length of the two fragments is 88 cm. and, with the two present ends at the same level, the arc formed by the bow rises to a maximum height of about 8.5 cm. The bow tapers very slightly towards its ends, and at the intact end it has an acutely angled notch cut into it at one side, 7.5 cm. from its tip, beyond which it narrows appreciably and is vertically perforated at its extremity (Fig. 5, inset). The bow is almost flat on its inner face and is rounded on the outer. It averages about 2.2 cm. in width and 1 cm. in thickness, except at a point 40.5 cm. from the intact end where it reaches its maximum width.

of 2.5 cm. and where there is a noticeable swelling about 5.5 cm. long and 2 cm. in maximum thickness. This swelling probably was intended to enable the archer to obtain a firmer grip on the bow, but although one would expect it to be slightly nearer one end of the bow than the other the differentiation here seems somewhat exaggerated. The wood is of yew (Taxus).

FIG. 5. Wooden bow; inset: enlarged detail of extremity

Although the use of the bow as a hunting and military weapon was known to the Irish from Neolithic times onwards, it appears to have been virtually ignored, above all as a military weapon, by them during the Early Iron Age and Early Christian Period. The Vikings sometimes used the bow for military purposes but the Irish do not seem to have adopted it from them. For the Anglo-Normans, however, the bow was a military weapon of primary importance and many of the iron arrowheads of Early Medieval type found in this country show that after the initial period of settlement they also used it as a sporting weapon. The type of bow used by the Anglo-Normans was the longbow, the essential difference between it and the pre-Norman bows, sometimes of equal length, being that the longbow was drawn to the ear and not to the breast.¹⁸ These Anglo-Norman longbows were often about six feet in length, but as the Adare specimen, when complete, was only about half that length it can hardly be classed as one. However, it is most unlikely that such long and unwieldy bows were used for sport, even by the Anglo-Normans, and there is, therefore, no reason to argue that the bow from Desmond Castle is necessarily pre-Norman in date.

The above-described objects from Desmond Castle are generally referred to as weapons and whenever they have been discussed or mentioned they are loosely dated

¹⁸ Oakeshott, op. cit., p. 293.
to pre-Norman times.\textsuperscript{19} This may be due to Lord Dunraven having described them as "similar in form and character to the weapons found in the Saxon cemeteries of England and the Frankish in France, and as are also found in our own crannoges or artificial lake-islands, which are usually of an age contemporary with the Saxon and Frankish cemeteries."\textsuperscript{20} As we have seen, a closer examination in the light of modern research suggests that strictly speaking only the spearhead and, to a lesser extent, the bow and the daggers could be described as weapons and, furthermore, that they all probably date from somewhere in the 14th century or thereabouts.

Iron keys are not easy to date closely, but we are exceptionally fortunate in the three found at Desmond Castle\textsuperscript{21} as all have a feature which is particularly characteristic of the 14th and 15th centuries, and that is the projection of the stem below the bit to form a point.\textsuperscript{22} The postsherds found at Desmond Castle\textsuperscript{23} are all of a type which, without more detailed examination than has as yet been given them, cannot be more closely dated than to some time between the 13th and the 15th centuries. The description by Dunraven of the iron object found in the dungeon-like cell as "probably a manacle or pedicle" seems to be justified, although certainty is rendered impossible as it is incomplete and somewhat unusual.\textsuperscript{24} Early Medieval iron fetters are very common and it is practically certain that the Adare specimen is one of these.

The objects now apparently missing can only be discussed from Lord Dunraven's descriptions and illustrations. The object made, seemingly, from the antler of the giant Irish deer consisted of two strips of antler held together by small iron rivets and was 1 foot 4 inches long. Dunraven quotes various suggestions as to what it may have been, ranging from portion of a crossbow to portion of a loom, and he also illustrates it, but its purpose remains a mystery. It was found in the moat, near where the "wooden sword" was dug out.\textsuperscript{25} The pointed tool or implement of antler is described and illustrated by Dunraven,\textsuperscript{26} but it also is undatable and its use puzzling. The portion of the iron chain and the small iron knife found at Desmond Castle are only briefly described by Dunraven, and neither is illustrated.\textsuperscript{27} Both are, in themselves, undatable, but neither would be out of place in an Early Medieval context.

The leather fragment found in the bed of the River Maigue below the Castle walls is small and not easily recognisable.\textsuperscript{28} Lord Dunraven quotes Sir William Wilde as saying that he thought that it was perhaps a piece of horse-trapping and that the open-work pattern with which it is ornamented was "effectively with a punch or series of punches, but not with one blow." Without ever having had the opportunity of seeing this leather fragment, it would appear to the writer, from Dunraven's illustration, to

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  \item \textsuperscript{19} e.g., \textit{Jour. Roy. Soc. Antiq. Ire.}, 46 (1916), 195, where they are described as "of the Danish period."
  \item \textsuperscript{20} Dunraven, op. cit., p. 130.
  \item \textsuperscript{21} Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 242-3; fig. 43, nos. 1-3.
  \item \textsuperscript{22} Ward-Perkins, op. cit., pp. 141-2.
  \item \textsuperscript{23} Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 243-5; pl. 31, nos. 1-6.
  \item \textsuperscript{24} Dunraven, op. cit., p. 126; fig. 25, no. 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{25} Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 132-4; fig. 28.
  \item \textsuperscript{26} Dunraven, op. cit., p. 243; fig. 54.
  \item \textsuperscript{27} Dunraven, op. cit., p. 243.
  \item \textsuperscript{28} Dunraven, op. cit., pp. 245 and 295; pl. 31, no. 7.
\end{itemize}
be possibly portion of a leather shoe. Leather shoes of Roman type with stamped open-work design are known, but not as yet from this country. Open-work ornamented leather shoes again became popular in Early Medieval times and one of the closest parallels known to the writer is the toe-piece of a shoe from London, preserved in the Guildhall Museum, London, and for which a 14th century date has been suggested.\textsuperscript{29}

Discussion:

As will be readily seen from the above notes the overwhelming evidence of the finds from Desmond Castle is that they all probably belong to the Early Medieval Period. Although it is perhaps not altogether fair to suggest it on the evidence advanced, the writer believes that they all probably date from about the 14th century, with the possibility that some may perhaps be dated slightly earlier and others slightly later.

The dating suggested for the finds from Desmond Castle raises a serious doubt in the mind of the writer as to the veracity of the commonly accepted theory of the Castle having been built on the site of an earlier ringfort. The somewhat rounded plan of the inner ward, its fosse, and the early dating generally given to the "wepons" found there, all probably helped to give apparent substance to this theory. The plan of the inner ward is, in fact, as much sub-rectangular as rounded and there does not seem to be any real reason why the moat should not have been an original feature appertaining to the Castle, rather than merely a deepening of the fosse of an already pre-existing ringfort. As a further, though far from conclusive, argument, it should be pointed out that the siting of a ringfort on such low-lying ground so close to a rather large and tidal river\textsuperscript{30} would be so unusual as to be highly unlikely. Finally, the complete absence of any find of clearly-proven pre-Norman date from the site argues very strongly against any such theory. Therefore, taking everything into account, it would appear that Desmond Castle must be considered as a strictly Anglo-Norman structure.

No suggestion can be advanced as to why these objects should have been lost in the moat and river, but it is worth remarking that Desmond Castle is known to have been greatly rebuilt and restored several times, notably in the early 14th century.

\textsuperscript{29} Catalogue of the Collection of London Antiquities in the Guildhall Museum, 2nd. edit., (1908), 147, no. 109; pl. LXXV, no. 4.
\textsuperscript{30} On the 1st edition of the relevant O.S. 6 in. map (1840-1); neap tides are marked as flowing to a point opposite Desmond Castle and spring tides to a point about 650 yards up-river, opposite the Manor House. On the 2nd edition (1920) ordinary tides are marked as flowing to a point about 300 yards up-river from Desmond Castle.