Excavations at an early church site at Struell Wells, Co. Down


Published in:
The church in early medieval Ireland in the light of recent archaeological excavations

Document Version:
Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

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7. Excavations at an early church site at Struell Wells, Co. Down
Finbar McCormick and Emily Murray

Introduction
Struell Wells, near Downpatrick, Co. Down (Fig. 7.1), has the most extensive set of buildings associated with a holy well site in Ireland (Fig. 7.2). The wells are associated with St Patrick and were a focus of pilgrimage from at least the twelfth century. The buildings include the ruins of an eighth-century church reputedly built on the site of an earlier medieval church. In the summer of 2012 a research excavation and geophysical survey were conducted to try and uncover remains of this early church and other evidence of medieval and possibly pre-Christian activity. The early church was not located but a burial horizon overlaid the ruins of the post-medieval church. The dividing line between the two areas pre-dating Cormac’s Chapel and it is suggested here that the siting of the church arch on the same alignment is a deliberate acknowledgement of the significance of this line, possibly a division between sacred and profane, such as that introduced at Reask (Fanning 1981). The final report on the excavations at Cormac’s Chapel is at an advanced stage of preparation (June 2014).

Bibliography

Notes
1. The alignment of this wall as presented in Ó Carragáin 2010, 286, is to my mind incorrect and should be closer to that of the cathedral than the chapel.
2. Courtesy of the INSTAR Mapping Death project.

Fig 7.1—Struell Wells: location map.
The church in early medieval Ireland in the light of recent archaeological excavations

EXCAVATIONS AT AN EARLY CHURCH SITE AT STRUELL WELLS, CO. DOWN

Towards the centre of the site is the Eye Well. This is a small, rectangular building with a corbelled stone roof. It is fed by an inflow culvert from the Drinking Well and is probably of thirteenth- to fifteenth-century date (ibid., 53; Jope 1966, 310). Further south are the two bathhouses. The women’s bathhouse is a rectangular building, now unroofed. Inside there is a spout built into the northern gable wall that continuously streams water fed by an inflow culvert from the stream. Carved sandstone mouldings also survive in the women’s bathhouse and, like those in the Drinking Well, they can be dated to sometime between the thirteenth and fifteenth centuries (McCormick 2009, 48). Wes of and set at right angles to the women’s bathhouse is the largest building on the site, the men’s bathhouse. This has three rooms: one with benches that functioned as a changing room; a second, interconnected room with a large sunken bath and steps down into it; and a third, outer room with a separate entrance opposite the ladies’ bathhouse and which functioned as a changing room for the women. The construction of the men’s bathhouse has been attributed to Lady Elizabeth Cromwell and has been dated to c. 1700 (ibid., 50).

The altar would have been centred on the long axis of the north-west wall, which has no window openings. A third door and an entrance in the long axis would have been in the centre of the north-west wall, which has no window openings. A third door would also have been expected in the missing gable wall. The windows and doors are plain square openings with no architectural features. This is very much in keeping with contemporary Presbyterian meeting houses, which provided a template for eighteenth-century Mass-houses. Plain rectangular “ocular” door and window openings are, for instance, present in the early eighteenth-century Non-Subscribing Presbyterian church in nearby Downpatrick (Jope 1966).

The 2012 investigations

Recent research on Struell by one of the authors (McCormick 2009, 2011), together with the rediscovery of St Patrick’s Chair, long hidden in dense overgrowth, has led to renewed interest in Struell. There have also been various initiatives to increase the profile of Ulster sites associated with St Patrick in order to enhance their tourist potential. The NIEA-funded geophysical survey and excavation at the site, which took place in May and June 2012, were a further contribution to this process.

The theory of the existence of an older, smaller church is reinforced by Harris (1744, 25), who, writing about Struell in the mid-eightheenth century, recorded the presence of “the ruins of a small chapel [sic] dedicated to St Patrick’. O’Laverry’s (1878, 248) states that this church was repaired in 1750 but the present ruin is clearly all of one build. The post-medieval church has a north-east-south-west orientation, while it would be expected that a medieval church would have been built on an east-west axis. As it stands, it has two entrances—one in the western gable and one midway along the southern side wall. The eastern gable wall is missing and the two side walls end just to the west of the stream. Given that the entrance in the long axis would have been in the centre of the wall, it is clear that the eastern end of the building straddled the stream, although it is now missing. Both O’Laverry (1878, 246) and the OS memoirs (Clay and McWilliams 1992, 50) record that the building was never finished owing to local Protestant opposition. The extant remains are important, as they appear to be one of the earliest surviving Mass-house structures in Ulster. The altar would have been centred on the long axis of the north-west wall, which has no window openings. A third door would also have been expected in the missing gable wall. The windows and doors are plain square openings with no architectural features. This is very much in keeping with contemporary Presbyterian meeting houses, which provided a template for eighteenth-century Mass-houses. Plain rectangular “ocular” door and window openings are, for instance, present in the early eighteenth-century Non-Subscribing Presbyterian church in nearby Downpatrick (Jope 1966).

The survey

The geophysical survey (electrical earth resistance) was conducted over an area of approximately 0.6ha. Its main objectives were to determine the layout and extent of the subterranean culvert system that transports water to and from the wells and bathhouses, and to locate the remains of earlier church foundations.

Both high- and low-resistance anomalies of interest were detected (Fig. 7.3) and, as might be expected, many appear to be related to the more recent activity at the site. These include the footings of stone buildings immediately south of the church (in an eighteenth/nineteenth-century building shown on nineteenth-century OS maps), relict paths (between the church and the well during improvements at the site in the 1920s (McCormick 2011, 7). Human remains were also reportedly found in this area at the time (McCormick 2009, 53). These discoveries support the probability that an early church was located in the vicinity of the post-medieval church. The existence of the church is indicated by the 1306 record of taxation that shows that Struell was then a separate parish—it therefore seems probable that it had a church (ibid., 51).

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Removal of the sod revealed a shallow, loose gravel layer that overlay a compacted angular stone deposit. These represent different metallic surfaces of a path or roadway that aligns with a small bridge over the stream, leading to the cottages on the opposite side. The gravel layer just below the sod probably dates from an earlier phase of presentation of the site when in state care. These metallic or compacted stone surfaces were built above an extensive stone deposit that was also found to extend under the church walls (the same stone dump layer found in trenches 1 and 4 inside the church, above which the church walls were built). Sections excavated through this material showed that it lay above a clay loam that produced a human tooth and a fragment of human bone, but no other artefacts or datable materials. Below this was a clay horizon with red/orange burnt stones and charcoal, which increased in thickness from the northern edge of the trench towards the well. Beneath this again was a voided large angular stone and boulder deposit with stones imprinted into an underlying clay deposit. The water-table was reached at a depth of approximately 60 cm.

Immediately adjacent to the Drinking Well, and below the extensive stone build-up (which continues under the wall of the church), were a series of ill-defined stone and clay deposits abutting the well. The interpretation of these is that the well wall was built at a lower level and then buttressed up externally with dumped material. Immediately west of the well, a linear stone feature, a wall or revetment, was excavated in plan and partially in section (24 cm in height). This appeared to be contemporary with the well’s construction, though only a short section (approx. 2.2 m) of it was revealed and further investigation will be required to identify its full form and function. In the south-eastern corner, a stony, flagged and cobbled surface leading to the well entrance was uncovered; this proved to be a continuation of a cobbled path revealed south of the boundary wall in trench 3 (see below).

Trench 3 (5 m by 5 m) was opened immediately south of the Drinking Well. The stone-built drain clearly detected in the survey was uncovered (Figs 7.4 and 7.5). It measured 50 cm in width and height externally and was capped with large, angular, relatively flat stones. When fully exposed, a couple of the capstones at the southern end of the trench were lifted, revealing that the interior of the drain (44 cm in width and 35 cm in height) had been pointed and lined in concrete and that clear water, emanating from the Drinking Well, flowed southwards through it. The heterogeneous deposits to the west of the drain comprised a series of recently dumped materials, with large pieces of modern ceramic drainpipes, complete wine bottles and other rubbish. The concrete pointing of the drain, the loose make-up of the soil and the presence of
modern rubbish throughout, in particular fragments of the same modern ceramic ridged drainpipe, suggest that a large area west of the drain was also dug away sometime in the last century, by hand or machine. Perhaps the area had become waterlogged and boggy owing to the blockage of the drain. A box section was opened through this material perpendicular to the drain. Below the modern dump layer was a thin, blackish-brown clay layer that overlay a sticky waterlogged clay abutting the external side wall of the drain. No positive cut for the drain through the clay was identified. The ground, however, was waterlogged (the water-table was reached at a depth of 70cm) and the presence or absence of a cut could not be determined with certainty.

To the east of the drain a cobbled stone surface measuring 1.6m in width extended westwards from the eastern edge of the trench across the full length of the trench, 4.3m north-south. The cobbled had a relatively even surface, with three east-west linear gullies or depressions. This continues into trench 2 and represents an old path leading to the entrance of the Drinking Well.

**Radiocarbon dates**

Multiple bulk samples of the "burnt mound" material in trench 4 inside the church were retained and processed in the laboratory at QUB. The majority of the charcoal that was floated off was finely particulated, with very few single-entity pieces suitable for radiocarbon dating. Two of the larger fragments of charcoal recovered from the bulk samples were submitted for dating to the *CHRONO* laboratory at QUB.

Fig. 7.4—Struell Wells: plan of main features excavated in trenches 2 and 3 to either side of Drinking Well.

Fig. 7.5 (opposite page)—Struell Wells: trench 3, showing stone-lined drain leading from Drinking Well and cobbled path.
Both returned radiocarbon ages that place them in the late Neolithic/Early Bronze Age (3848±23 BP) which calibrates at the 2-sigma range (95.4%) to cal BC 2459–2205 (UJA-223718), and 4600±24 BP (UJA-22285), which calibrates at the 2-sigma range (95.4%) to cal BC 2831–2352. The samples may derive from the heartwood of a potentially long-lived species (such as oak) and therefore provide a date centuries older than when the tree was actually cut, creating an "old wood effect" (Lasting and Brindley 1991, 26). Even if this is the case, the possible error would still only be on a scale of centuries rather than millennia. These results contrast with the radiocarbon dates returned for two twigs from the same context. During the excavation of the burnt layer, a distinct cluster of charred twigs was noted at the base of the deposit and was sampled separately. This comprised a collection of short-lived twigs (15–17 years old), identified as ash (Fraxinus sp). By David Brown (QUB). One of these returned a radiocarbon age of 6132±27 BP which calibrates at the 2-sigma range (95.4%), to cal AD 1296–1400 (UJA-22403), and the second a date of 121±28 BP, which calibrates at the 2-sigma range (95.4%), to cal AD 1860–1953 (UJA-22777).

In addition to the samples of charcoal from the burnt horizon, a sample of human bone (fragments of femur) from one of the articulated skeletons (SK4009) was submitted for radiocarbon dating. This returned a radiocarbon age of 945±29 BP which calibrates at the 2-sigma range (95.4%) to cal AD 1025–1156 (UJA-22341). A second sample of human bone was submitted but had insufficient collagen to allow analysis.

The date returned for the skeleton is several centuries older than that returned for the ash twigs, which were stratified below it. Meanwhile, the samples of charcoal recovered from the same deposit as the twigs, but not necessarily of short-lived specimens, are millennia older. Even given the possibility of the old wood effect, for which there is no general "correction factor" (Lasting and Brindley 1991, 26), the margin of error would only push the date a few centuries earlier. At best, the radiocarbon results for the charcoal provide a minimum post quem date for activity at the site and a maximum range date, though the picture is far from clear.

Discussion

Early structural remains: the church and the Druigal Hill

One of the objectives of the 2012 excavations was to locate the foundations of the early church. No positive structural remains of a church were encountered, but the presence of burials in, ante, suggests that the earlier church building was probably located in the vicinity of the present rath house, possibly further west. The discovery of human remains was recorded during the course of repair work in the 1920s (Mc Cormick 2009, 53), while human bones were also sometimes smoothed during ploughing in recent years, which has led to a local tradition of a graveyard lying immediately north-west of the ruined church (ibid).

The other aim of the excavation was to determine whether there were any earlier structural remains or other features associated with the Drinking Well, which documentary evidence suggests is the original and primary well of the site. In trench 3, south of the well, modern disturbance indicates that few (if any) early remains survive. In trench 2, north of the well, the picture is more complicated, with various linear arrangements of stones and flagstones uncovered. The main feature of any consequence was the stone-built wall or revetment at the eastern edge of the trench, which appeared to be contemporary with the well. As only a small area of this feature was exposed, it was not possible to determine in form or function. In the geophysical survey plots (Fig. 7.3) there is a faint linear high-resistance anomaly in this location, which may be imaging the same feature partly recovered in the excavation trench. Interestingly both linear anomalies are on an approximate east–west orientation (west-northwest/east-south-east). Further excavations will be required to determine the full extent of this feature.

The "burnt mound" material: antiquity of the site from the prehistoric period?

The heather-blazed stones and charcoal are the typical characteristics of burnt mounds or fulachta fada, widely recorded from sites across Ireland and elsewhere in Europe (O'Neil 2003–4, 82; Barfield and Hodder 1987, 370). The associated apparatus—hearth, pits dug in the ground and stone or wooden clamps or baisins—are only occasionally found (O'Neil 2003–4, 83). This site type is a common anomaly in proximity to water and is typically devoid of artefacts, including food debris, and generally lacks telltale evidence (Barfield and Hodder 1987, 371), all of which is consistent with the evidence from Struell.

The interpretation of these burnt mounds is that stones, heated in a fire, are placed in water to boil it, thereby producing heated water for cooking or bathing or, if contained by a structure of some sort, steam and potential use as a "sauna". There has been much discussion about burnt mounds and whether they represent the remains of cooking or bathing (Barfield and Hodder 1987; O’Dricidhe 1988; O’Neil 2003–4). Barfield and Hodder (1987) have argued that burnt mounds represent the remains from sweat-houses (sauna) or sweat-bathing of some form, and that the sauna had a ritual function of purification as part of religious practices and beliefs. The tradition associated with many saunas and sweat-houses, including in Ireland, is that they are accompanied by a cold plunge after leaving the sauna (Barfield and Hodder 1987, 372). At Struell this could have been performed by bathing in the stream or in an early incarnation of the Drinking Well.

Documentary sources from Ireland include a number of accounts that describe the boiling of liquids using heated stones—an activity that would yield the burnt mound material as recorded in the archaeological record (O’Neil 2003–4). Radiocarbon analyses of burnt mounds from Ireland show, however, that few (less than 5%) are contemporary with these historical descriptions, a pattern also recorded in Scotland, England and Scandinavia (ibid, 83). The majority of the burnt mound sites in Ireland date from the second millennium BC, with a peak age range of 1600–1400 BC. Many also date from earlier and extend back into the third millennium BC, with which the Struell dates can be compared (ibid).

The radiocarbon dates returned for Struell, if the Needles date are representative (ignoring the dates for the trophy), indicate a substantial hiatus of thousands of years between the burn mound and the skeletons that were found directly overlying this horizon. The twigs retrieved from the base of the burnt material and which returned modern dates also highlight issues of stratification and the probability of the reworking of the burn mound layer.

Conclusion

What is clear from the excavation and survey is that the area around the well and at the northern end of the site contain a large amount of redeposited material, with some evidence for the removal of material as well as redeposition. It would seem that the site was originally a wet, marshy area that was reclaimed and levelled up by the addition of dumped material for the construction of the well in medieval times. Included in this redeposited material were quantities of burnt mound material, Souterrain Ware and even a prehistoric flint chopper (found in trench 2). It would also seem that this reclamation of the area was a continuous affair, encompassing a large degree of soil disturbance, because early medieval and relatively modern material were often found adjacent to each other.

There was clearly early medieval activity in the area, as evidenced by the presence of Souterrain Ware. Unfortunately, this pottery is difficult to date precisely as it is found in use for several centuries from the eighth century (Baillie 1986, 106). It may have been in use in the eleventh/twelfth century and could therefore be contemporary with the burial evidence. It is interesting that the earliest evidence for the possible relationship of the site to the parishes of the early medieval period.
The townland of Ballyhanna is on the southern bank of the River Erne on the outskirts of Ballyshannon, Co. Donegal (Fig. 8.1). In 2003, during the pre-construction phase of the N15 Bundoran—Ballyshannon Bypass, archaeological investigations commissioned by the National Roads Authority (NRA) and Donegal County Council (DCC) unexpectedly revealed the foundations of a small medieval church associated with a graveyard in the north-east corner of a field bordered by East Port Road and Station Road (centred upon Irish Grid Reference 1881036083). The site was in a relatively flat area at the base of a steep hill overlooking the Erne, whose southern bank, prior to the channelisation associated with the Erne Hydro-Electric Scheme in 1946, was only 50m to the north across a narrow floodplain.

The site was not marked on any of the historic maps for the area and had evidently become forgotten in local memory. There was, however, awareness among historians that a church of the name ‘Ballihanny’ had been present in this vicinity, as the Crown Commission’s inquisition, undertaken on 12 September 1609 at Lifford, had reported that:

“You also saie that in the said parish (of Enishmissagh) is a chapple of ease, called Efennoare (Minnerl in Maginey, unto which said chapple the vicar of the said parish is to send a curate to say divine service; and that in the said parish also is another chapple called Ballihanny (Ballihannaj’ (Allingham 1879, 74).

With no upstanding church remains in the townland of Ballyhanna, it was thought that this was a reference to the ruined medieval church in the neighbouring townland of Sminver, despite the chance discovery of human remains close to what would become the excavated site at Ballyhanna from the 1870s through to the 1950s (Begley 2009, 470–1).

The cemetery was excavated over a six-month period in the winter of 2003–4 by Irish Archaeological Consultancy Ltd, under the direction of Brian Ó Donnchadha, and was funded by the NRA through DCC. The remains of some 1,296 men, women and children were recovered, and a subsequent extensive programme of radiocarbon dating revealed that the earliest interments on the site had taken place in the late seventh to early eighth century AD, and that burial continued until the early seventeenth century. As such, the corpus of skeletons from Ballyhanna represents one of the largest collections of medieval human remains excavated in Ireland. In addition, when taken in conjunction with the location of the site in south Donegal, the dating evidence meant that this was a medieval Gaelic population, and the only major assemblage of its type ever excavated in Ireland. The significance of the discovery received recognition from the NRA and DCC, who in 2005 established the Ballyhanna Research Project, a cross-border research collaboration between staff and students in Queen’s University Belfast, and the Institute of Technology Sligo. The objective of the project was to combine cultural-historical approaches with scientific research to reveal new insights about the lives and deaths of the medieval Gaelic population buried in the graveyard at Ballyhanna (see McKenzie et al., forthcoming). This essay provides an overview of the main discoveries made during the course of the excavation.

Fig. 8.1—Ballyhanna: location map.