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## EXCAVATIONS ON A MOUND AT GRANSHA, COUNTY DOWN, 1972 AND 1982: AN INTERIM REPORT

by C. J. LYNN

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The excavated site was an artificial mound, 6·7m. high and about 22m. in average diameter across the flat summit (Fig. 1). It lay 1·2km. S. of Six Road Ends, between Bangor and Newtownards, on the farm of Mr F. Stuart (O.S. grid reference J 531769). The potential archaeological interest of the mound was well known; it was described in *An Archaeological Survey of County Down* (Jope 1966, 194) as a raised rath or, more probably, a motte and was occasionally visited in the course of organised field trips.<sup>1</sup> The site survived intact until early in 1972 when the Ancient Monuments Branch, Department of Finance (N.I.), was informed by Mrs E. O'Fee and Dr J. D. Bateson that a substantial part of the mound had been quarried away and that a further section was in imminent danger of collapse. A limited rescue excavation of the endangered portion under the direction of the writer was arranged immediately by the Branch with the permission of the owner. When the 1972 excavation was finished about two-thirds of the mound survived and the face of the steep damaged portion was revetted with spoil from the excavation. Further subsidence in 1981 necessitated a small excavation which took place in 1982 after which the remaining part of the mound was consolidated and grassed. The participation of a number of members of the Bangor Historical Society in the 1982 season is gratefully acknowledged.

### THE SITE

The mound at Gransha is barely visible from the by-road which runs some 250m. to the S. The view is partly blocked by the lower slopes of a small drumlin which overlooks the site on the SW. The site lies at the SW. end of what was once an extensive area of bogland, the small hills in which are still named 'islands'. Some of the bog was not drained until the 19th century and the site was probably less easily accessible in the past than it is now.

The placename, Gransha, means a grange or farm, usually belonging to an abbey. But it is not

known when the name was first applied locally and it is still less clear if it relates to the present site. Before excavation the mound was thought to have been either a raised rath or a motte. Raised raths are field monuments of the Early Christian period, 500–1200 A.D. They occur in many parts of Ireland but are not very common and usually now appear as large, flattish-topped, grass-grown mounds like the Gransha site. They sometimes have a slight bank around the summit, which often tilts towards a ramp or entrance causeway across a ditch from which material for the mound was obtained. Sometimes raised raths were built up in several stages as a result of prolonged occupation on the one spot with occasional additions to the site of dumps of clean upcast material to make fresh occupation surfaces and to cover old midden material. A raised rath can be imagined as a number of normal, flat rath settlements piled one on top of the other. A good example was excavated at Ballynarry, near the S. tip of the Ards peninsula by Mr B. Davison in 1959 (Davison 1961–2). Some Early Christian period mounds, however, were heaped up to form elevated settlements all in one operation. These are known as platform raths and it is, of course, difficult to decide if a particular grass-grown mound is one of these or a raised rath.

Mottes, on the other hand, were flat-topped mounds erected by the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th or early 13th centuries usually as the bases of strongly defended dwellings of a timber (and perhaps later stone) castle or dwelling (McNeill 1975). They are usually assumed to have been defended around the perimeter of the summit by a timber palisade like that revealed in the excavation of Clough Castle (Waterman 1954). Mottes, such as the prominent example at Dundonald, are sometimes mentioned by name in medieval documents and these sites can often be identified on the ground. Other mounds can be described confidently as mottes from the occurrence of adjacent features such as a medieval settlement, church or attached bailey (a lower enclosure defended by earthworks). Usually motte mounds

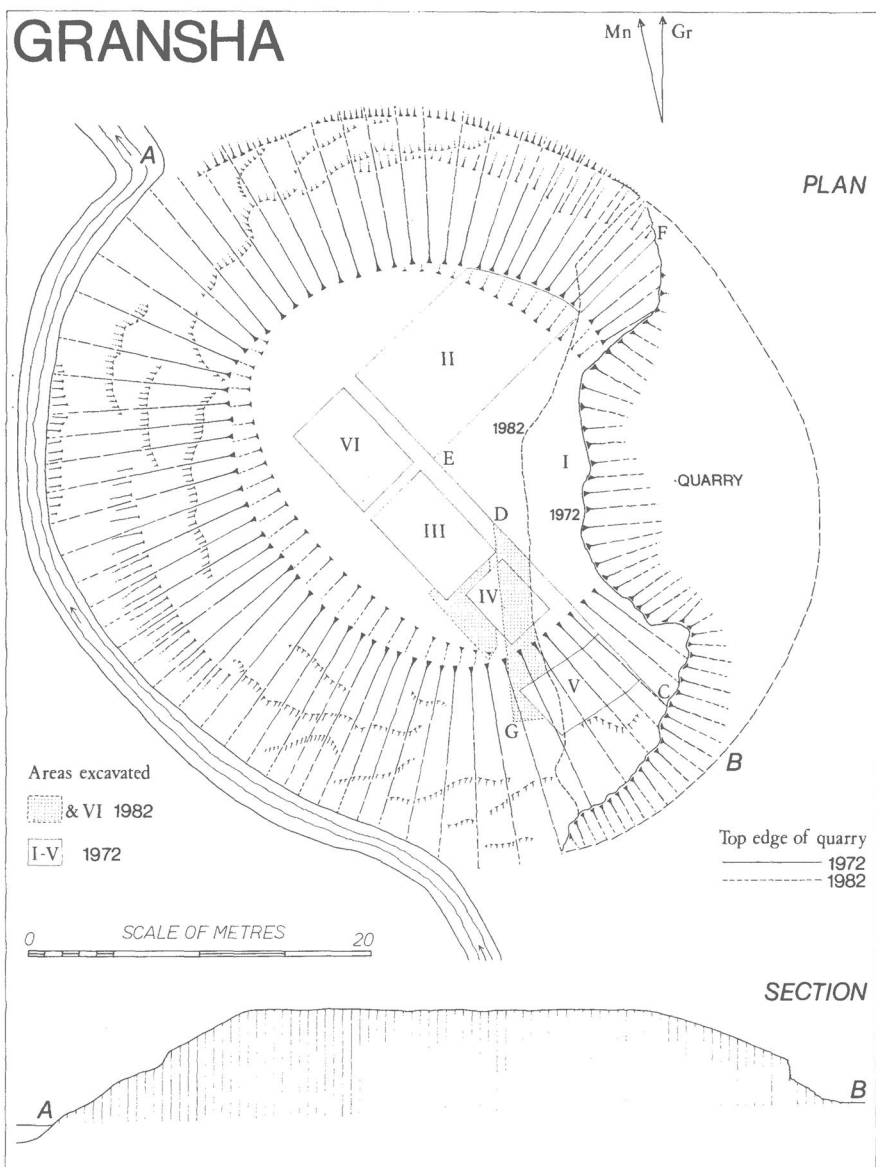
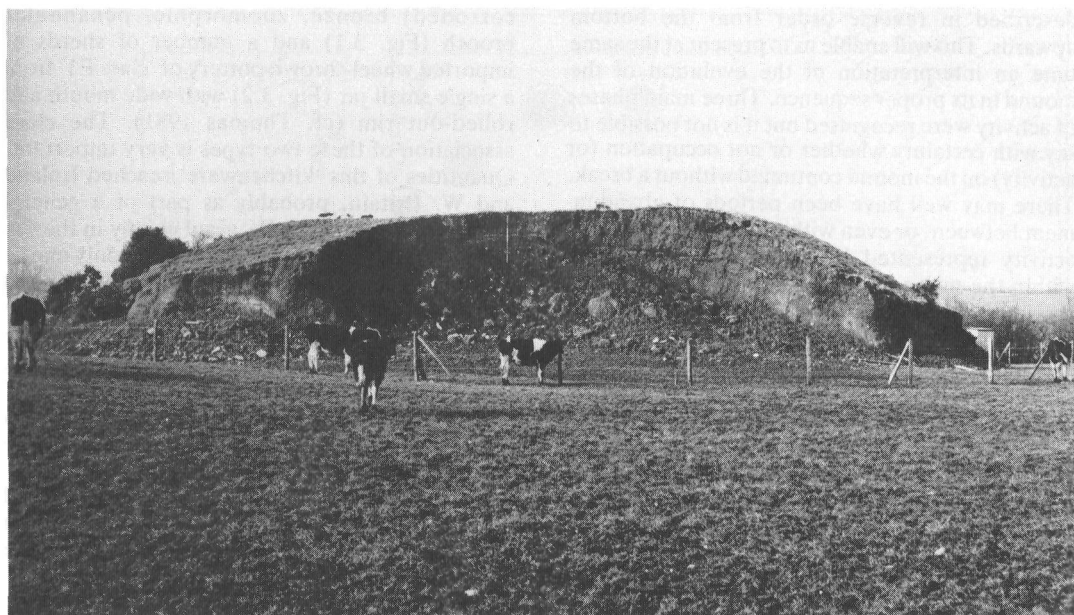


Fig. 1. Gransha mound, Co. Down: general plan showing excavated areas and positions of quarry edge in 1972 and 1982. (Cutting 1 incorporates the entire damaged quadrant, C-E-F.)

were surrounded by a continuous, deep ditch and originally had no obvious ramped approach, access having been obtained by steps or a movable wooden bridge. The Normans in Ulster often

adapted earlier raised raths to form mottes (e.g. Rathmullan, near Ballykinlar) or used old rath earthworks as baileys (e.g. Dunsilly, N. of Antrim town).



Pl. 1. Gransha mound, Co. Down from E. in 1972 before excavation showing strata exposed in damaged section.

Before its excavation it is true to say that the mound at Gransha did not fit obviously into any category, but it was expected that there would be a medieval occupation phase on the summit, even if the mound was not significantly heightened or altered at this time, because the area was settled in the Anglo-Norman period and because a number of broadly similar mounds excavated in E. Down in the 1950s and 60s also produced evidence for activity in the 13th century (Lynn 1981–2, 166–9). The Gransha mound had no (surviving) approach ramp and no ditch so it could not be described confidently either as a raised rath or a motte.

When first visited in March 1972 a large section through the E. side of the mound had been exposed (Pl. 1). The crumbling face encroached on the flat summit so that the entire stratigraphic history of the monument was visible in an irregular section. Two important conclusions were obvious at once. First, the mound was partly natural in origin: the artificial deposits had been heaped up on an oval-plan 'kame' or small, glacial sand and gravel hillock, the summit of which at the centre reached to within 1.3m. of the flat top of the artificial mound. Secondly, the superimposed artificial part of the mound had built up as a series of separate occupation layers interspersed with deliberate dumps of clean, upcast gravel (in the absence of a ditch these were presumably derived from trimming the lower slopes of the natural

mound). The occupation surfaces were clearly marked by midden layers and streaks of dark charcoaly soil containing burnt soil and broken animal bones (food refuse). Some at least of these layers dated to the Early Christian period because sherds of souterrain ware, the characteristic coarse pottery of the period in E. Ulster, were found lying in the scree. It was not clear from which level or levels in the mound this material had eroded. The artificial part of the mound, however, had clearly accumulated in a number of episodes, some certainly in the Early Christian period, probably over a long time. The date of the final phase summit level was still uncertain.

## THE EXCAVATION

The two seasons of excavation will be summarised as one, since the short 1982 excavation amplified rather than altered conclusions reached in 1972. An extensive area of the summit was examined but at the centre and W. side the stratigraphy had been hopelessly disturbed by animal burrows. The lower levels of the mound were investigated in narrow cuttings on a scale sufficient only to examine those strips at the edge of the slumped section in danger of eventual collapse. It might seem logical to outline what was found in sequence from the top downwards – that is, working backwards in time – but the results of the excavation will be

described in reverse order from the bottom upwards. This will enable us to present at the same time an interpretation of the evolution of the mound in its proper sequence. Three main phases of activity were recognised but it is not possible to say with certainty whether or not occupation (or activity) on the mound continued without a break. There may well have been periods of abandonment between, or even within, the main phases of activity represented by the complicated strata within the monument.

### Phase 1

The natural ridge on which the first activity took place was about 5m. high. It appears to have been elongated on an E.-W. axis but fell away more abruptly to N. and S. It certainly extended beyond the perimeter of the surviving, artificially-modelled monument. Over most of the excavated area an old, largely natural soil horizon was preserved, showing that the ridge under the first artificial deposits had not been altered or truncated.

The first group of features on the site, constituting phase 1, comprised a small ditch about 1.8m. wide and 0.8m. deep running around the slope of the mound well up on the E. side (Fig. 2). It is not possible to say if this ditch was part of a complete enclosure (a length of some 7.5m. was uncovered) or, if so, what the diameter of the enclosure might have been. A guess, based on the apparent shape of the ridge, would put the diameter at about 35m. and the suggested enclosure would probably have been oval in plan. It is likely that this phase 1 ditch has been removed elsewhere in remodelling of the mound. There were traces of a low bank (possibly timber-revetted) on a slight artificial terrace immediately upslope from the ditch. Overlying this and contiguous with the inner edge of the ditch was a continuous, annular spread of deeply-burnt, red soil, about 5m. wide, on which lay large lumps of charcoal. These appeared to derive from branches rather than shaped posts or planks although two square post-holes were found in the centre of the band of burning. This burnt material could represent the destruction of a loose palisade or fence of timber and brushwood associated with the low bank immediately upslope from the ditch. The interleaved mixture of red soil and charcoal suggested that the small bank had collapsed over the remains of the timberwork, which may in part have served as a revetment, as it burnt. There were no other traces of activity behind the ring of burning and the surface of the old soil continued, largely undisturbed, up to the summit of the hillock.

The few artifacts from this phase were found close together in the bottom of the ditch and comprised a highly-decorated (but badly-

corroded) bronze, zoomorphic, penannular brooch (Fig. 3.1) and a number of sherds of imported wheel-thrown pottery of 'class E1' from a single small jar (Fig. 3.2) with wide mouth and rolled-out rim (cf. Thomas 1981). The close association of these two types is very important. Quantities of this 'kitchenware' reached Ireland and W. Britain, probably as part of a general trading network, from W. Gaul chiefly in the 6th and into the 7th century A.D. Usually only one or two sherds are found on any E. Ulster site and here they all belonged to a single vessel. The brooch is of 'group D' of which examples were found in excavation on the hill-fort at Clogher, Co. Tyrone, in association with 'B amphorae' sherds, another type of imported pottery which immediately pre-dated E ware at Clogher (Warner 1979).

Two samples of charred timber were submitted to the Queen's University, Belfast, Radiocarbon Dating Unit for age estimation and produced the following results:

| Lab. No. |          | Date before<br>'Present' (1950) | Date      |
|----------|----------|---------------------------------|-----------|
| UB 2597  | Sample B | 1465 ± 55 b.p.                  | a.d. 485* |
| UB 2598  | Sample A | 1580 ± 50 b.p.                  | a.d. 370  |

\* Lower case a.d. is used to indicate that this is an uncalibrated radiocarbon date and not an estimate of the true calendar age.

These radiocarbon dates would need to have an unknown factor added in each case (perhaps up to 100 years) to allow for the fact that the charcoal was derived from timber. Calibration of the dates (a correction factor to allow for the fact that the level of <sup>14</sup>C in the atmosphere was not constant) would also tend to make the calendar age 'younger' at this period. The results, therefore, are entirely compatible with the *circa* early 7th-century date which would be suggested for this phase on the basis of the few, but nonetheless important, finds.

Not enough evidence was recovered to enable comparison of this phase at Gransha with other excavated Early Christian sites in Ulster. Phase 1 features were not extensively excavated but may not survive over a large area of the rest of the site. No traces of occupation debris or other structures were found in the area examined upslope and it is possible that the isolated gravel ridge was adapted as a short-lived stronghold, use of which may have been ended by burning of the largely wooden defences. The fire could have been accidental or deliberate. The slight ditch silted up almost completely before the onset of phase 2 but this need not represent a long time in loose gravelly soil on a

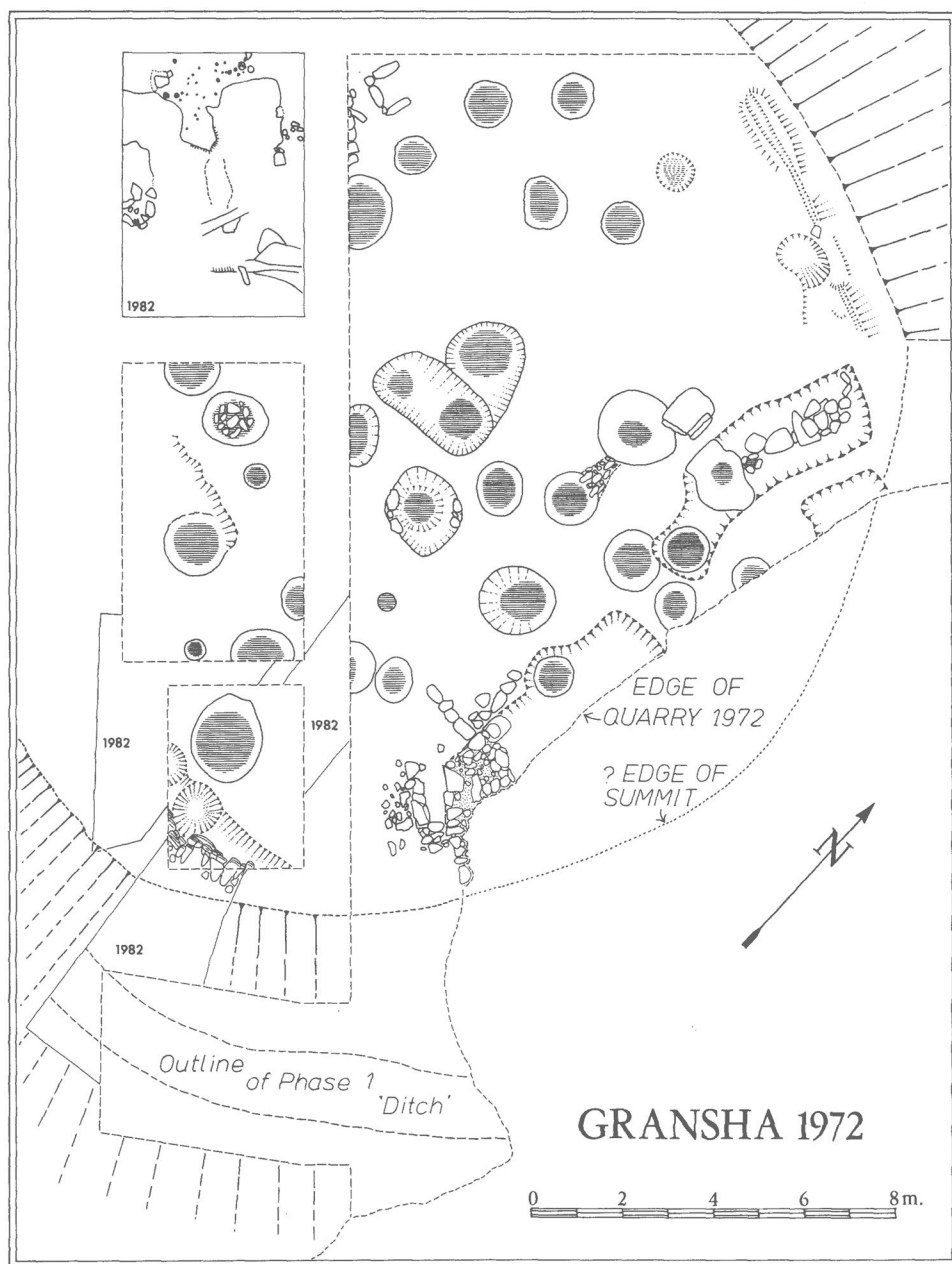


Fig. 2. Gransha mound, Co. Down: outline plan of the summit, phase 3, features. Of chief interest are the pits and (possible) post-holes, flat bottoms shaded and 60cm. deep on average. Are the larger features rubbish pits or re-cut post-holes?

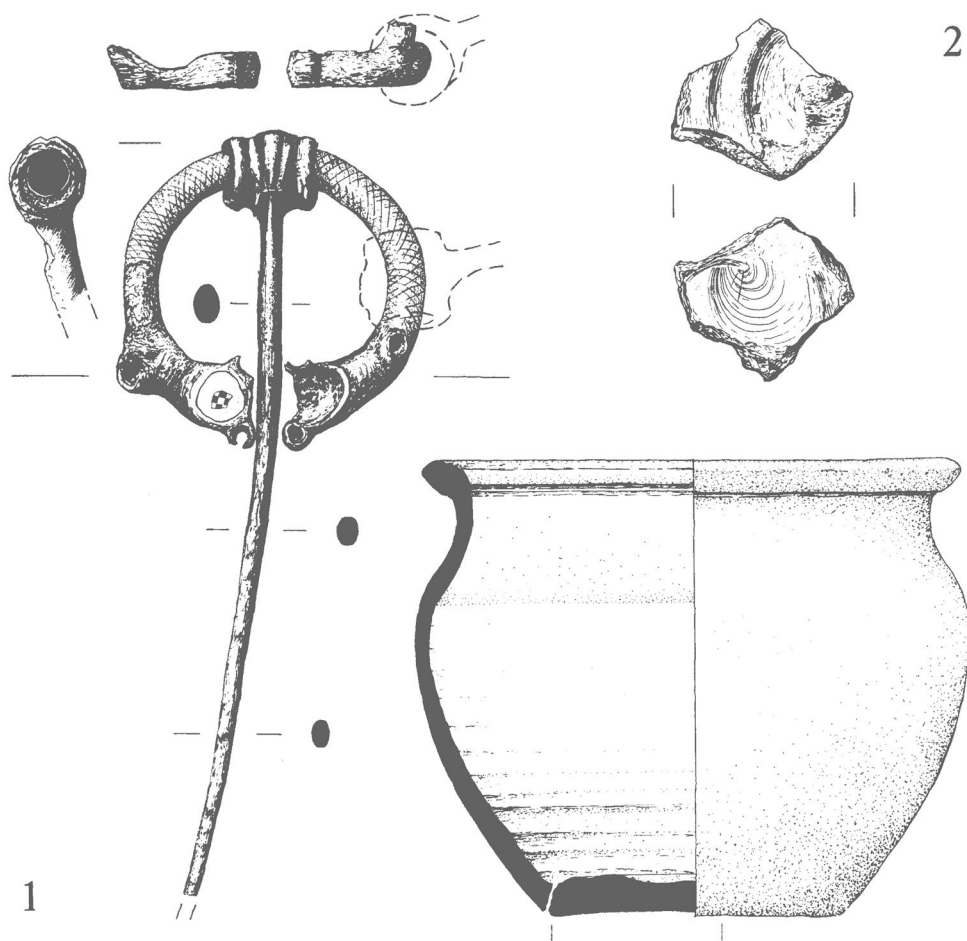


Fig. 3. 1. Bronze penannular brooch with millefiori glass and enamel in terminals. Actual position of pin outlined. Phase 1 ditch ( $\times 1/1$ ). 2. Imported, wheel-thrown vessel of class E1, reconstructed from 15 sherds. Note raised rings inside base and string cut-off outside. Phase 1 ditch ( $\times 1/2$ ).

slope. Although no clear soil profile developed over the remains of the low bank, perhaps because of erosion on the slope, it is possible that there was a break in the occupation before the deposits assigned to phase 2 began to accumulate.

#### Phase 2

The deposits of the second phase consist of a layer complex 30cm. thick on average, of dark occupation soils and ash, which covered the entire domed summit of the mound. There was no trace of a preceding artificial build-up or enclosure but at one point traces of what may have been a bank

were noted near the end of phase 2 on the S. slope. On the sides of the mound the artificial deposits built up to a much greater depth, nearly 1m. in places, in which up to 20 separate, thin layers could be observed. A number of stone-kerbed hearths were found and there was a super-imposed series of hearths on a small terrace overlying the phase 1 ditch on the S. side, but no traces of houses or other structures were found near them. An arc of stake-holes found in a small, but very disturbed, trench at the mound's summit probably related to this phase and could represent part of a circular wattle structure. One of the layers on the slopes of the mound consisted solely

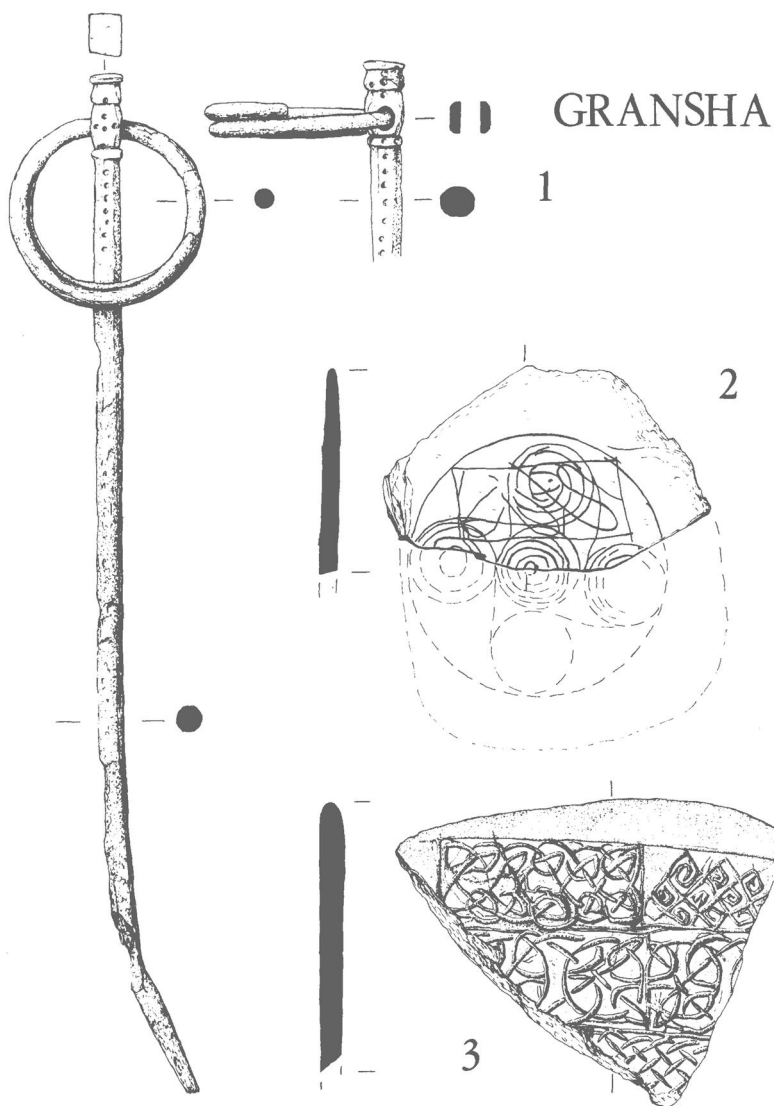


Fig. 4. 1. Bronze spiral-ringed pin with dot decorated head and octagonal shank. Phase 3 ( $\times 1/1$ ). 2. Part of motif-piece of shale with lightly-incised compass-drawn pattern of circles. Phase 2 ( $\times 1/2$ ). 3. Fragment of shale motif-piece bearing several deeply cut interlace patterns. Phase 2 ( $\times 1/1$ ).

of animal bones, compressed and badly disintegrated when uncovered. A hearth had been built on this layer. It is likely that the sequence of events represented by the numerous layers on the slopes of the mound is also contained in very

attenuated form in the shallower deposits on the summit of the mound.

On the upper surface of the phase 2 occupation deposits a series of tiny alternating ridges and hollows was noted. These were dug grooves and

they extended right across the narrow strip excavated on the SE. side of the mound in 1982. On average they were 1–2cm. deep, 5cm. wide and 15cm. apart with 1cm. high ridges of upcast between. These corrugations were only noticed because of the contrasting clean build-up of phase 3 immediately overlying the dark occupation soils of phase 2. The shallow grooves were perhaps seed drills.

Two abraded sherds of E ware were turned up at the bottom of phase 2 levels near the top of the mound; they are residual from phase 1 and belong to the same vessel as the other E ware sherds. Phase 2 deposits produced a small quantity of plain souterrain ware and a large number of iron objects including a pointed 'ferrule', knives, a long spoon or spatula, tweezers, a stylus and a 'slotted and pointed object'. Only a few scraps of bronze were recovered but there was, by comparison with other sites, a disproportionately large number of stone implements, more than 40, ranging from spindle-whorls, 'polishers' and hones to large rubbing stones. A few pieces of clay moulds, one for a decorated brooch-pin terminal, were also found.

The most important finds were over 40 fragments of flat stones, mostly thin local shale about 5cm. in diameter, bearing lightly scratched geometric designs. A few of the pieces could be joined together. Some of the designs were relatively well-executed (Fig. 4.2, 3); others at first look like meaningless doodles but turn out to have a number of poorly-drawn, simple patterns superimposed. These trial- or motif-pieces form an important group of material for several reasons. They show that an artisan or an apprentice was practising a wide range of designs on the site. They can also be used to help date phase 2 and they provide a range of (presumably) associated patterns. Some of the arcs and circles on the pieces were compass-drawn and one of the iron objects from phase 2 is perhaps a leg of such an instrument. The designs on the motif-pieces are familiar from background panels and borders on carved crosses, books and metalwork and most appear to have been current over a lengthy period. A date in or around the early 9th century can be suggested (see O'Meadhra 1979 for descriptions).

To judge from the number of layers on the mound slope it is likely that a fairly long time is represented by phase 2 deposits. The material cannot, therefore, automatically be assumed to form one related group. Indeed, it is possible that phase 2 can be broken down into a number of subphases, each of different character. Perhaps the mound was used for a period as an ordinary rath or farmstead and at another time some specialised manufacturing process was carried

out, suggested by the number of polishing and rubbing stones. The mound may have been used for a while as a refuge by a few members of an ecclesiastical community, as the motif-pieces and evidence for metalworking invite comparison with finds from the early monastery of Nendrum on Mahee Island, Co. Down (Lawlor 1925). On the other hand this material might only indicate that someone studying these intricate patterns lived on the mound, perhaps for only a few weeks either as a refugee, visitor or student on vacation, and he need not have been an ecclesiastic. Many of these finds, however, would be surprising discoveries on a rath and suggest that small-scale craft activities were carried out on Gransha mound, a feature usually associated with ecclesiastical sites or at least minor 'royal' sites. This is difficult to reconcile with the awkward and isolated mound location near an extensive bog but can be compared with the contemporary crannogs where the inhabitants had, generally, relatively rich cultural material but their quarters were difficult of access and were distanced from the fields and pasture on which their wealth depended.

More than half of the phase 2 levels (of which about one quarter were excavated) survive unexcavated in the remainder of the mound but it is likely that parts of these have been badly disturbed by burrows.

### Phase 3

By the end of phase 2 the mound had largely lost its natural profile; at the edges it had increased in height by up to 1.5m. and there was some evidence for a bank on the slope, at least on the S. Presumably the material for this gradual build-up and for the bank was largely obtained from the lower slopes of the natural mound. Any phase 2 alterations, however, were deeply buried in a dramatic and sudden re-modelling of the mound which marked the start of phase 3. It is unlikely that there was a significant interval between the end of phase 2 and the start of phase 3.

The domed and possibly embanked hillock was converted into a large steep-sided, flat-topped mound by dumping clean upcast till over the phase 2 deposits. At the top of the phase 2 mound the dumped overburden was about 1m. thick but in places increased in depth up to about 1.8m. towards the edge of the platform as the phase 2 surface fell away beneath. The level summit thus created was 22m. in average diameter, 6m. high and 48m. in diameter at the base. More than half of the summit, which had been deeply cultivated, was excavated (Fig. 2). Thirty large pits, on average 1m. wide and 1m. deep, were scattered seemingly at random over the summit. The loose filling of these pits suggested that they had been used for

rubbish disposal but this may not have been their primary function. The only certain traces of structures found were a small trench running along the perimeter on the S. side, two stone-kerbed hearths and one edge of a rectilinear dry-stone setting, perhaps a foundation for a building, most of which appears to have fallen into the original mound slip. There was some slight evidence for a fence around the perimeter of the platform and several isolated small pits which may have served as post-holes.

Finds from this phase include souterrain ware, lignite armlets, a barrel padlock, an iron 'strike-a-light', a green and white herringbone-pattern glass bead and a large bronze spiral-ringed pin with baluster head (Fig. 4.1). Although some of the 'rubbish pits' penetrated the phase 2 surface there was only slight evidence that any of the phase 3 finds were derived from lower levels; for example, two small scraps of inscribed slate were found in phase 3. It is clear that this final phase of occupation lay within the Early Christian period and no medieval finds were made, even from the topsoil. The heightening of the mound probably occurred much closer in time to the end of phase 2 than the start of the medieval period, so a date for this phase in the 10th century is more likely than in the 12th. Occupation on the summit seems to have been fairly intensive because there was a large number of finds from a relatively small area. There is no reason to suppose, however, that the site was not used in the same way as an ordinary rath except that the presence of numerous large pits in such a site would be most unusual. In a rath rubbish can be scattered around a large area or be disposed of in a ditch but here at Gransha there was no such convenient dump although the mound slope could have sufficed as it did in phase 2. Rubbish pits have rarely been recorded from raths but some have been recognised recently at an ecclesiastical site in Scotch Street, Armagh.<sup>2</sup> It is possible, however, that the Gransha pits represent the holes dug to remove structural posts, originally set into narrower holes, backfilled with a mixture of upcast and occupation soil.

The monument of phase 3 could be called a raised rath because there were at least two earlier phases of Early Christian occupation. But the dramatic increase in height and the steepening of the slopes underlines the desire of the builders to create a *high* platform mound. If the builders had been satisfied with the still substantial height of, say, 4m. (rather than 6m.) above the surrounding land they could, by levelling the top of the phase 2 mound outwards, have achieved a level platform of twice the area for a fraction of the work. Obtaining extra height was, therefore, important

to the people at the time, but whether this was to increase the security or the status of the site remains a matter for debate. Whereas it had been thought previously that some Early Christian raised raths became like mottes more or less accidentally, through prolonged occupation and small-scale dumping (for levelling and tidying), at Gransha it was clear that the achievement of extra height in one operation to motte-like proportions was a deliberate aim of these Early Christian mound builders. In other words some of the physical, if not conceptual, attributes of mottes had been adopted in Ireland several centuries before the coming of the Normans. Clearly, it is no longer necessary to explain the occurrence of motte-like mounds in areas not settled by the Normans as contemporary native copies of mottes, unless there is excavated evidence to suggest that the (final) heightening took place after the middle of the 12th century. Such heightening could still represent continuity of the indigenous tradition rather than copying from the Normans. It is likely that some of the undocumented 'mottes' in Norman-occupied areas will prove on excavation to be largely or wholly Early Christian in date. It is less clear if the existence of these Early Christian motte-like mounds in Ireland encouraged the Norman colonists to readopt the motte as a settlement or temporary castle mound. Pre-Norman mounds were, after all, greatly outnumbered by ready-made grass-grown ringworks.

The excavations at Gransha have revealed a wealth of information quite out of proportion to their scale and it is pleasing to record that a large volume of the mound survives for investigation in the future thanks to the interest of the owner. Though disturbed on the E., from the W. the monument appears completely intact and is a valuable relic in the N. Down countryside. The mound is now scheduled for protection under the Historic Monuments Act (N.I.), 1971, and it is intended to prepare a full publication of the excavation.

### *Summary of results*

Phase 1. Cutting of a slight ditch on slope of natural hillock. Uphill, a small bank associated with a timber and brushwood fence or revetment. Finds: sherds of E1 jar and penannular brooch. This brief episode ended with the burning of the timberwork, collapse of the bank and silting of the ditch.

Phase 2. Accumulation of occupation layers and sterile upcast, thin on the summit but usually c. 1m. downslope overlying infilled phase 1 ditch. Some scattered hearths but no certain traces of structures or defences. Finds were prolific and

included plain souterrain ware, ironwork, rubbing stones, 40 motif-pieces of stone and a few clay moulds for casting bronze.

Phase 3. Finally, in one large-scale operation the mound was heightened by 1m. at the centre and 1.8m. at the edges with sterile dumped subsoil. On the elevated level platform thus created further occupation took place in the Early Christian period and the main features revealed were 30 large pits. Finds included plain cordoned souterrain ware, a glass bead, an iron 'strike-a-light' and a fine spiral-ringed pin.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Thanks are due to Mr E. M. Griffith, Miss J. Quinn and Mr N. Crothers for valuable assistance on site. The drawings were prepared by Mrs D. Warner.

## NOTES

1. Information from Mr E. M. Griffith, to whom I am grateful for photographs of the site in an undisturbed state.
2. At 16 Scotch Street (C. Lynn, unpublished) and 50-6 Scotch Street (J. Quinn, pers. comm.).

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