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Recycled Ringforts: The Evidence from Archaeological Excavation for the Conversion of Pre-Existing Monuments to Motte Castles in Medieval Ireland

BY CÓILÍN Ó DRISCEOIL

INTRODUCTION

It has been recognised for some time that pre-existing sites were re-used for the construction of motte castles in medieval Ireland. Both Westropp and Orpen in the early 1900s mentioned the practice and in more recent years the same observation has been repeated by modern researchers (Barry 1987, 37; Lynn 1981-2, 112; McNeill 1989-90, 57-8; O'Keefe 2000, 21-2; Ó Ríordáin 1979, 56; Orpen 1907; Westropp 1904). The fact that natural topographical features were utilised has also been noted by Barry, Culleton and Empey (1984, 165).

Explanations for the practice have generally centred on the convenience that pre-existing earthworks afforded the Anglo-Norman motte-builders and the possibility that there was a certain symbolism inherent in the re-use of earlier settlement sites by the colonisers, i.e. it was an act of symbolic subjugation by the Anglo-Normans over the native population (e.g. Barry, Culleton and Empey 1984, 165; O'Keefe 2000, 21-2). This paper attempts to build on the work outlined above by firstly cataloguing the available evidence for site conversion and secondly by analysing the data to ascertain whether additional factors were at play in the siting of mottes on earlier monuments. Impetus for this study came from an opportunity in 2000 to record an eroded motte section in Mayne, Co Louth and the results of this are presented in Appendix 1.

CATALOGUE

This section lists in summary form the evidence garnered from archaeological excavations of Irish motte castles. Data is available from fifteen sites, including Mayne (Fig.1). O'Connor proposes that there are 476 recorded Irish examples (O'Connor 1998, 18; though see O'Keefe 2000, 16). Thus only 3.15% of the total sample population has been investigated through archaeological excavation and indeed even within this the quality of the evidence is uneven.

Stratigraphic data from archaeological excavation generated up to the year 2000 is employed in this catalogue. Given the focus of this paper there is a particular emphasis placed on any indications for the re-use or adaptation of earlier sites by a motte. Attention is also given to any indications of continuity between the ringfort and motte phases of an individual site. The evidence for this relies heavily on the interpretation of the excavator though stratigraphic data is also employed. Information from field survey and/or geophysical survey results are not included as their reliability in determining the nature of site re-use is somewhat unreliable.

Entries are arranged in alphabetical order with the county after the site name. A brief description of the excavator's interpretation of the stratigraphic sequence is followed by additional comments. The reader is referred to the bibliography if further information is required.

1. Béal Bóru, Co Clare [NGC 166500 174100] (Fig. 2)

Excavated by O'Kelly (1962). Interpreted as an unfinished motte constructed c. 1200 on top of a pre-existing ringfort that was possibly destroyed in 1116. Twohig (1978) suggested this was a ringwork though O'Keefe (2000, 21) has questioned this interpretation citing the absence of a

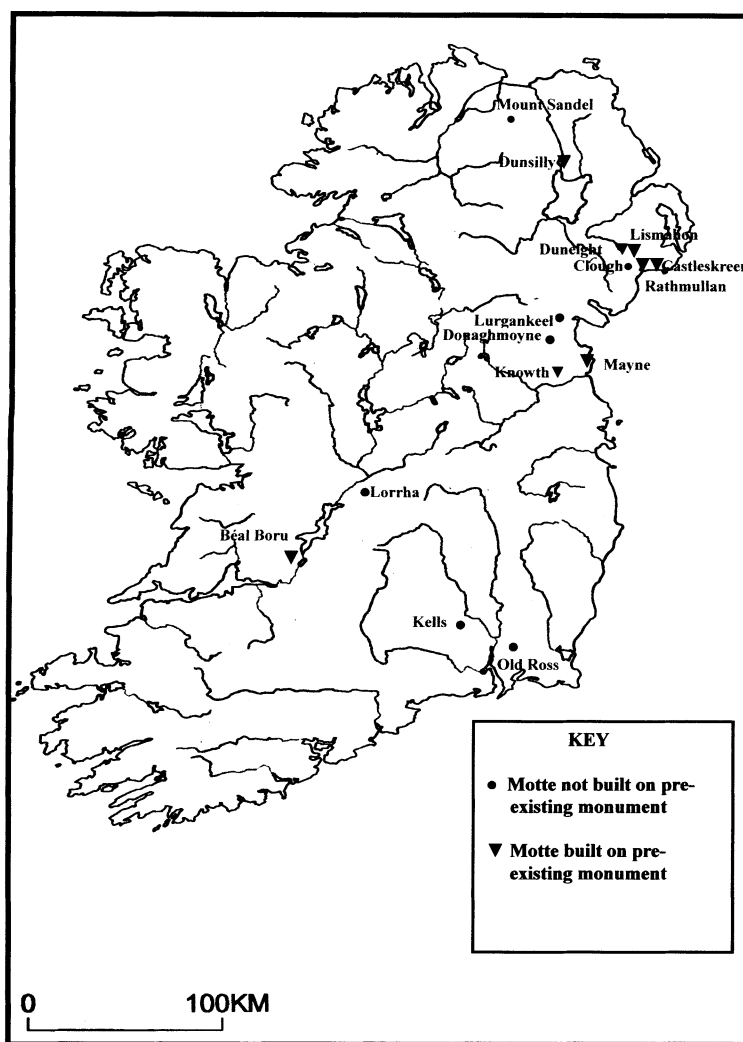


Figure 1: Distribution of archaeologically excavated motte castles in Ireland.

palisade surrounding the bank. Abandonment of the ringfort attested by bank collapse and the development of a sod layer between the ringfort and motte phases.

2. Castleskreen, Co Down [NGC 347400 340300] (Fig. 2)

Excavated by Dickenson and Waterman (1959; 1960). The motte was built in the first half of the 13th century on a pre-existing ringfort by using the earth from the encircling ditch to raise the motte to the desired height. The building of the motte followed the last occupation of the rath in quick succession and it was suggested by the excavators that the construction of the motte was the cause of the abandonment.

3. Clough, Co Down [NGC 340900 340300]

Excavated by Waterman (1954). Motte erected *c.* 1200. A rectangular hall and 'weapon pit' recorded at summit. Later tower house subsequently erected. No evidence for a pre-existing monument.

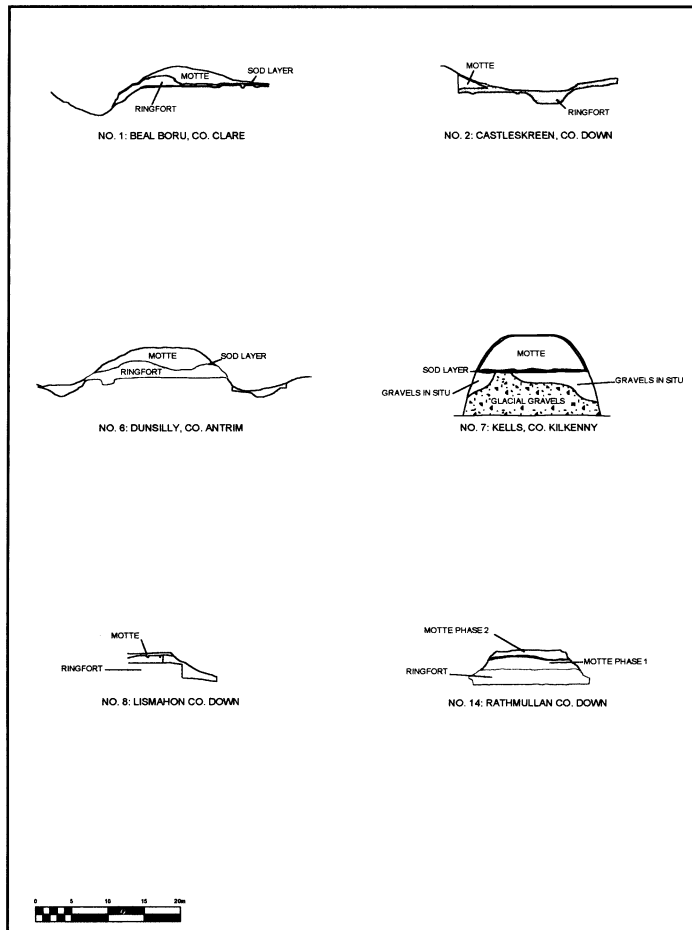


Figure 2: Selected sections through Irish motte castles.

4. Donaghmoyne, Co Monaghan [NGC 285090 309370]

Excavated by Moore (1999). Following geophysical survey an outer bailey ditch, a ditch between the inner and outer bailey and an outer bank were partially excavated. No evidence for a pre-existing monument.

5. Duneight, Co Down [NGC 327770 360780]

Excavated by Waterman (1963). Site originated as a large pre-Anglo-Norman enclosure that was, according to the excavator, subsequently remodelled as a motte-and-bailey. This interpretation has been questioned by O'Keefe who suggests the motte-and-bailey was constructed prior to 1169 (O'Keefe 2000, 29). Regardless of origin Duneight was used and probably modified to a certain extent by the Anglo-Normans.

6. Dunsilly, Co Antrim [NGC 314100 388900] (Fig. 2)

Excavated by McNeill (1991-2). Small motte built over a ringfort. Dating somewhat problematical, though the ringfort phase appears to have lasted from the 8-10th century and the motte was subsequently constructed *c.* 1200. A sod layer between the Early Christian and Anglo-Norman phases suggests the ringfort was abandoned for some time prior to the construction of the motte.

7. Kells, Co Kilkenny [NGC 249900 143400] (Fig. 2)

Recorded in section by Barry, Culleton and Empey after it was partly destroyed (Barry, Culleton and Empey 1984). Alternating tip layers were laid down on a glacial hillock to form a large motte. No evidence for a pre-existing monument.

8. Knowth, Co Meath [NGC 299900 273800]

The main passage tomb (Site 1) at Knowth was fortified in 1176 for a short time by the Anglo-Norman knight, Richard Fleming, prior to incorporation into a Cistercian grange in 1185 (Graham 1974; 1980). Stout notes that it is considered by some that the fortification was in fact a ringwork which re-used the earlier strategically-sited ringfort at Knowth (Stout 2002, 96).

9. Lismahon, Co Down [NGC 342900 338900] (Fig. 2)

Excavated by Waterman (1959). A motte was built *c.* 1200 by heightening a pre-existing raised-platform ringfort. Remains of an Early Christian square house with rounded corners superseded by a medieval wooden tower. According to the excavator the building of the motte and the last occupation of the rath followed each other in quick succession.

10. Lorrha, Co Tipperary [NGC 192000 204500]

E.J. Talbot recorded a rough section that had been exposed through the damaged motte (Talbot 1972). Tip-lines suggested to Talbot that the 'ring-and-fill' technique was employed to construct the motte. No evidence for a pre-existing monument.

11. Lurgankeel, Co Louth [NGC 302200 311900]

Excavated in 1964 by Ó hEochaidh but never fully published (Barry 1987, 42; Anon. 1965, 22; Buckley and Sweetman 1991, 292). Motte and bailey enclosed by a fosse. Timber tower surrounded by a palisade on summit of motte. No evidence for any pre-existing structure beneath the motte.

12. Mayne, Co Louth [NGC 314260 284880] (Fig. 7)

Motte recorded in section (see below). Constructed on top of a midden, perhaps a portion of a settlement. Exact nature of site unknown. No evidence for a time-lag between motte and underlying deposits.

13. Mountsandel, Co Derry [NGC 285300 430700]

A section was specifically excavated through a ditch surrounding the extant motte-and-bailey castle by Collins to determine if the motte had been built on a pre-existing Early Christian monument (Collins 1975-6). No definite evidence for such a site was found. A radio-carbon determination of *c.* 1230 AD was obtained from a carbonised branch at the base of the ditch.

14. Old Ross, Co Wexford [NGC 279400 127800]

Recorded in section by Culleton and Colfer, following disturbance (Culleton and Colfer 1974-5). The motte was built on a glacial hillock. No evidence for a pre-existing monument.

15. Rathmullen, Co. Down [NGC 347800 337300] (Fig. 2)

Excavated by Lynn (1981-2). A motte was built *c.* 1200 on a pre-existing raised-platform ringfort. Further raising of the motte done intermittently. No evidence that the ringfort was abandoned prior to motte construction.

REMARKS

In the conversion of pre-existing indigenous monuments, Ireland was not unique within the Norman world. Roman and Saxon fortifications and prehistoric tumuli were re-used by the motte-builders in Britain and similar practices are recorded from France, Germany and Italy (Higham and Barker 1992, 273; Kenyon 1990, 6, 29). Nevertheless a cursory glance at the excavation evidence from these countries indicates that site modification occurred to a far lesser extent than in Ireland. Of the fifteen Irish mottes for which excavation data exists, eight (53.33%) were built on a pre-existing monument: Béal Bórú, Castleskreen, Duneight, Dunsilly, Knowth, Lismahon, Mayne and Rathmullen.

Ringforts were converted in six cases (40% of the total): Béal Bórú, Castleskreen, Dunsilly, Lismahon, Rathmullen and probably Duneight. Indirect evidence from sites such as Dún Dealgan motte, Co Louth and Moat, Co Meath where souterrains underlie a motte, would tend to reinforce the statistic (Clinton 2001, 53). As was noted in the introduction, convenience and symbolism have been the two reasons commonly put forward to explain the frequency with which these sites were remodelled into mottes. It cannot be denied that given the ease it afforded, particularly in regard to the 'ring-and-fill' construction technique, a ringfort would have been useful and given the limited means of many of the Anglo-Norman adventurers, it was perhaps an economic imperative for some. The act of building a fortress over a pre-existing Irish settlement would also undoubtedly have been a powerful symbol of conquest. Yet expediency and symbolism may not have been the only motivating factors behind the re-use of such sites.

Perhaps the most interesting statistic to emerge is that half (Castleskreen, Lismahon, Mayne and Rathmullen) of the adapted settlements were active immediately prior to being built upon. Though the archaeological signal for it would undoubtedly be difficult to decipher, there is no evidence that any of the sites were forcibly taken. This raises two interesting possibilities. Firstly, that it was the native Irish who raised some of the sites and secondly that a number of the mottes were constructed by the Anglo-Normans with the consent of the local population.

Regarding the former, given the evidence that already exists for native motte construction (e.g. Duneight) it is entirely reasonable that the Irish would have remodelled their own ringforts in such a manner and indeed it would take little effort to change a platform ringfort into a motte as was shown at Rathmullen and Lismahon (Glasscock and McNeill 1972; McNeill 1980, 102-3, 113-14; see Barry 1987, 42-5; Herity 1993; O'Connor 1998, 75-6; O'Keefe 2000, 27-9). At Castletown Kilberry, Co Meath the third phase of the platform ringfort shows many similarities with Rathmullen and Lismahon though Moore considers the site was occupied by the Irish as an expanded platform ringfort into the thirteenth century (Moore 1988-9). Whether the Irish motte-castles were perceived to have had the same administrative and political role as the Anglo-Norman castles is another matter though.

There are also indications that a number of ringforts could have been transformed into mottes by the Anglo-Normans with local consent. Many mottes were built in the second phase of the colonisation (c.1190-1220) when in many areas the native population had been largely subdued, albeit temporarily. Another, not unrelated factor is that accommodations and pacts were common between native and newcomer and the ceding of a settlement could have occurred in this context.

The purpose of this paper was twofold. Firstly it was to bring together the evidence generated from archaeological excavation for the conversion of pre-existing sites into motte castles and secondly it was to evaluate the data with a view to determining the motivations behind the phenomenon of site re-use. While it cannot be denied that the sample is small, the major trends that emerge are quite clear and are likely to be broadly representative. Specifically, a high

frequency of mottes utilised a pre-existing site, usually a ringfort and settlements that were active were regularly employed. The factors influencing these trends are without doubt more intricate than was hitherto thought with, as other writers have suggested, convenience and symbolism being important but perhaps of equal significance was the complex nature of the Anglo-Norman colonisation and equally the multi-faceted character of the native Irish response to the conquest.

APPENDIX 1

MAYNE, CO LOUTH

During a visit to Mayne, Clogherhead, Co Louth in January 2000 the author noticed that trampling by cattle had eroded a section through the east side of a motte, exposing a number of archaeological layers. Following consultations with Dúchas, The Heritage Service¹ and with the kind permission of the landowner, Mr Joseph Meegan, it was decided to record and publish the exposed section.

The motte: Mayne is situated on the south side of Clogherhead harbour, some 800m from the present coastline (NGC 314260, 284880; 21m O.D., Fig. 3). Immediately to the north of the motte is Mayne church, which dates from the 15-16th century and is surrounded by a graveyard

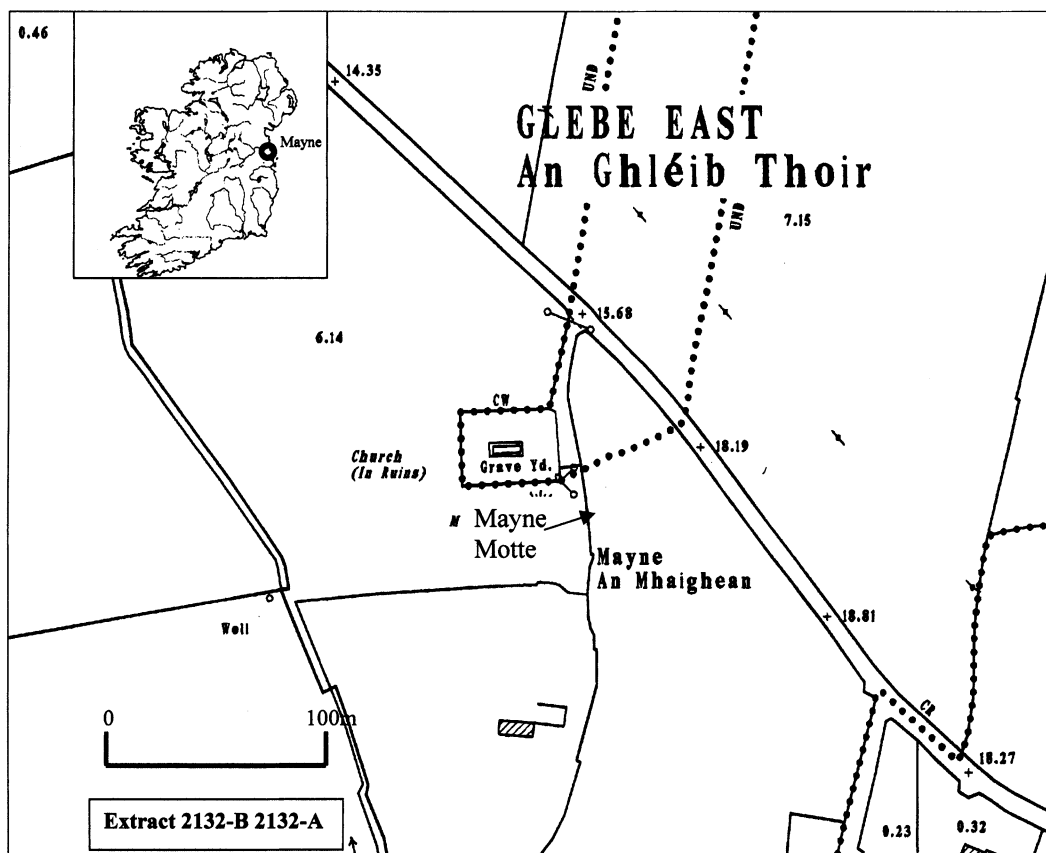


Figure 3: Mayne, Co Louth, site location. Based on Ordnance Survey Ireland permit number 7678. Copyright OSI.

1 The archaeological recording was carried out under licence no. 00E0053 issued by Dúchas, The Heritage Service.

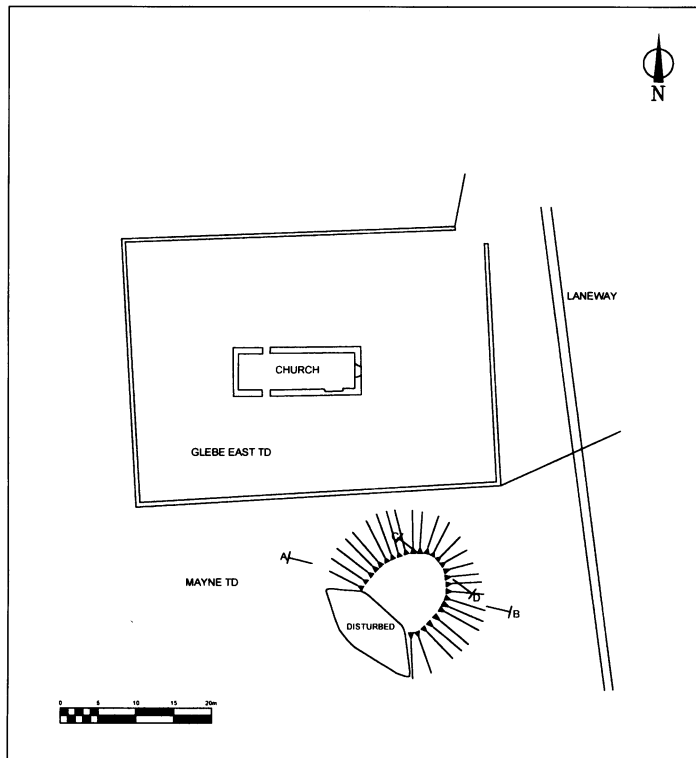


Figure 4: Mayne, Co Louth: motte and medieval church. Based on Ordnance Survey Ireland permit number 7678. Copyright OSI.



Plate 1: Mayne motte, Co Louth, from east.

containing 18-20th century burial monuments (Buckley and Sweetman 1991, 231-2) (Fig. 4). It is likely the extant church replaced an earlier foundation.

Mayne motte is one of some twenty-five examples in Co Louth though when and by whom it was built is somewhat unclear (Fig. 5). In Uriel, which included Mayne, the native king, Murrough O'Carroll, appears to have been on good terms with the Anglo-Norman invaders and retained possession of his lands until his death in 1188 or 1189 (Otway-Ruthven 1968, 70). This is at odds with Smith's assertion that Hugh de Lacy interpreted his grant of Meath in 1170 to include the barony of Ferrard (Smith 1999, 31). The Annals of Loch Cé also tell us that when John de Lacy was killed in 1186, Meath from the Shannon to the sea was 'full of castles and of foreigners' (Otway-Ruthven 1968, 64). Consequently, while it is feasible that the motte at Mayne was built by the De Lacys with O'Carroll's consent during his lifetime, it is also possible it was constructed *c.* 1200 by the de Verdons who were granted Ferrard by King John shortly after O'Carroll's death (Otway-Ruthven 1968, 71-2; O'Connor 1998, 20; Fig. 4).

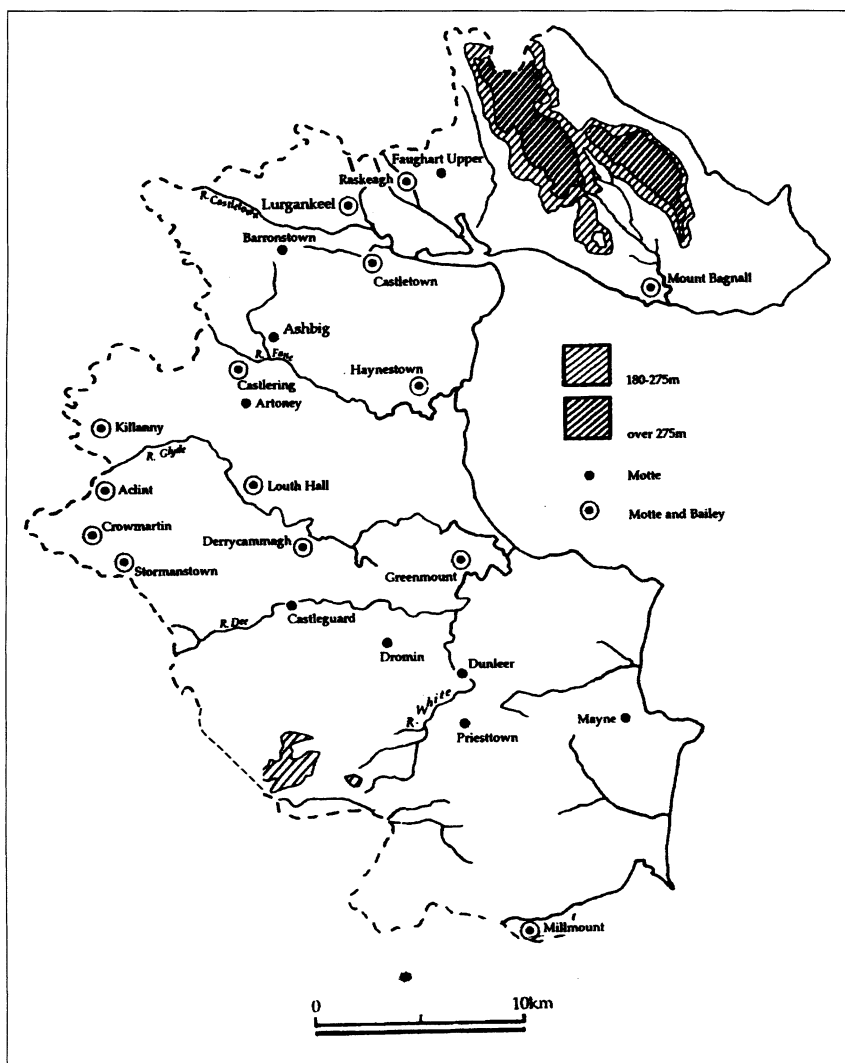


Figure 5. Distribution of mottes in Co Louth (after Smith 1999, 47, map 3).

Despite Mayne's lowland position the motte takes full advantage of a slight rise in the gently undulating coastal plain to achieve prominent views in all directions. Its strategic importance lay in its control of Clogherhead harbour and, assuming contemporaneity, it formed the south-eastern point of an L-shaped network of five mottes that must have provided a formidable barrier and effective administrative system. The other four mottes are situated, beginning at the north, at Derrycammagh (17.5km distant), Dromin (12km), Dunleer (8.5km) and Piperstown (6km) (Buckley and Sweetman 1991, 285, 286, 292) (Fig. 5).

Much of the motte has been scarped in recent years and that which remains is probably only a small portion of the original earthwork (Plate 1; Fig. 6). There is also mention of gravel being drawn from Mayne 'church and moat' in an accounts book dated 1842, which may account for some of the damage.² Despite this it fulfils the morphological criteria suggested by Müller-Wille for defining a motte (Müller-Wille 1966, 7). It is a small flat-topped mound (max. diam. at base 29m, 11m at summit, 4m max. height) (Fig. 6). There is no visible evidence for a bailey or enclosing fosse. The exposed section cut through the east side of the mound and was 3.40m long x 1.28m high to the top of the existing earthwork (Fig. 6; Plate 2). The archaeological stratigraphy recorded in the section is described below, beginning at the earliest unit.

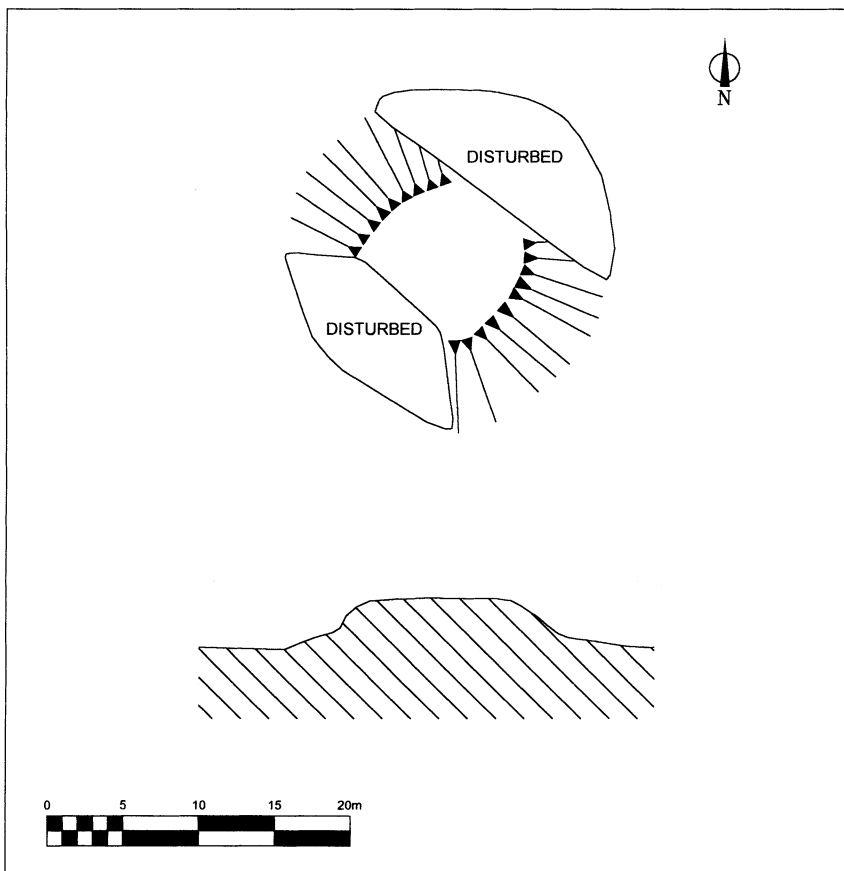


Figure 6: Mayne motte, Co Louth, plan and section A-B.

2 The accounts book is in the possession of Mr Noel Ross.

Stratigraphic description (Fig. 7)

001 was a soft mid-grey sandy silt containing frequent ash, moderate amounts of charcoal, occasional large stones, 0.20 thick. The bottom of the deposit was not reached. Frequent molluscs and occasional pieces of animal bone were also noted. Interpreted as midden deposit.

002 was a soft, friable dark blackish-grey clayey silt containing frequent small stones and occasional ash, 0.15m deep. There were also inclusions of large quantities of molluscs and animal bones. Interpreted as midden deposit.

003 was a hard, mid-brown sandy clay with large quantities of stone, charcoal and animal bone, 0.75m deep. Interpreted as the primary motte deposit.

004 was a hard mid-brown sandy gravel, with frequent stones, occasional animal bone and molluscs, 0.60m deep. Several tip layers were visible within it. This deposit made up the bulk of the motte and is likely to be the classic 'secondary levelling' found at the mottes at Dunsilly, Clough and Lismahon (Waterman 1954; Waterman 1959, Fig. 53; McNeill 1991-2).



Plate 2: Mayne motte, Co Louth, exposed section from east.



Figure 7: Mayne motte, Co Louth, section C-D.

Finds: No diagnostic finds were noted in the section, though three pieces of flint debitage and a small quantity of unidentifiable animal bone were recovered from the two midden deposits at the base of the section. In addition, some fifty molluscs were contained in these deposits.

Interpretative comments: Without more extensive excavation and empirical dating evidence it is very difficult to offer any firm interpretation of the stratigraphic sequence or the nature of the site-type at Mayne. What is clear though is that the two major gravel deposits that formed the bulk of the monument overlay two midden deposits. The absence of a turf-line between the gravel and midden units suggests that there was not a significant time lapse between their deposition and the midden had surface visibility at the time of the deposition of the gravels. Given what is known about motte construction in Ireland it is not unreasonable to suggest that the gravels represent the body of the motte and the midden deposits part of a pre-existing site, perhaps related to a ringfort.

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