

Settlement and Disease: A Plague on All Your Raths

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Source: *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 19, No. 4 (Winter, 2005), pp. 14-17

Published by: [Wordwell Ltd.](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/20559095>

Accessed: 13/03/2014 19:51

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Dr Chris Lynn revisits the reasons why ringforts may have become the most popular type of settlement site in the Early Christian period and offers a pragmatic explanation for the development of the apparently 'fortified' farmsteads.

SETTLEMENT AND DISEASE: a plague on all your raths

The ringfort, a circular-plan earthwork or drystone enclosure, is the commonest field monument in Ireland, with traceable examples estimated at around 40,000. Ringforts date from the Early Christian period, about AD 500–1000, although some authorities thought that significant numbers of them dated from the early Iron Age. At the other extreme, they have been regarded as indicators of post-Norman settlement, but it now seems that a large majority date from about AD 650–900. The monuments have been interpreted as the defended settlements of landholders, enclosing houses and in some cases

farmyards. The huge number of ringforts built during a relatively short time seems to defy explanation, especially when the settlement sites of immediately earlier and later periods are hard to find. At no other time did such a large proportion of the population fortify itself in visible monuments.

Excavations in ringforts have revealed the remains of about 250 small buildings, probably nearly all of which were dwelling houses. It is sometimes suggested that ringforts contained farms. Maybe in some of the larger examples it was possible to separate a dwelling area from a farmyard, but in the average ringfort with a diameter of

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some 30–40m there would not have been much room for enclosing stock, and excavation has revealed little evidence for outbuildings or farming-related activities in ringforts. The dating evidence from ringforts suggests that they were built between about AD 650 and 900, with a majority perhaps beginning earlier in the range. Why did a significant proportion of the population of Ireland suddenly decide to live in isolated defended settlements of this form in the late seventh and eighth centuries, but not before and not since? This seems especially puzzling given that in other aspects of life at the same time, for example art, learning and the church, Ireland is regarded as enjoying a golden age, a beacon for Europe in the 'Dark Ages'.

Various explanations for the popularity of ringforts have been proposed, none entirely convincing on its own. For example, it has been suggested that the landscape was being opened up to cultivation for the first time in hundreds of years, using improved farming techniques and crops, partly derived from sub-Roman Britain. But even if new farming technology and social changes prompted a population expansion in a landscape that was relatively uncultivated, that on its own did not necessitate

digging a ditch and building a bank or wall around so many dwelling sites. Allowing for demonstrations of status and small-scale copying of the larger strongholds of the élite, it seems obvious that physical defence of the home and family was the main objective. But defence against what? Ireland was not undergoing invasion or much raiding from abroad. Internecine skirmishes seem to have been no worse than in later times. In any event, ringforts are unlikely to have played a significant role in warfare. What was the immediate fear in the seventh/eighth centuries that was not prevalent at other times?

Rath defences were not strong enough to resist even a few determined assailants. It is also difficult to see what would be the military point of attacking a rath; the few occupants did not possess treasures that could be traded or consumed (unless in times of severe hardship). Even if we admit that they could have protected stock, most of the time the animals would have been in the fields or on upland pasture and would have been vulnerable to being driven off. The ringfort seems to have been designed to afford families some defence against uninvited intruders, perhaps a few marauders at any one time. They may also have served to



The horrific effects of leprosy can be seen on this modern victim. In ancient Ireland such diseases would have caused widespread fear and panic and resulted in the unfortunate sufferer being shunned and barred from all forms of social interaction.

Plagues and famines recorded in the Annals of Ulster, 664–825			
664–825	Plague	764	Famine and disease
670	Famine	768–770	Disease
680	Leprosy	773	Drought, famine, disease
683–684	Mortality of children	774–778	Bloody flux
700–701	Murrain of cattle	778–779	Mortality of cattle
700–702	Famine and pestilence	779	Famine and smallpox
708	Murrain of cattle	783	Scamach
709	Pestilence	786	Pestilence
714	Drought	799	Snowfall...men and cattle died
742	Leprosy	806	Pestilence
743	<i>Bolgagh</i>	814	Distress and severe illness
748	Great snow...drought	825	Famine and pestilence
760	Famine	No further 'mortality' until 907	

exclude stock from the dwelling area or, symbolically, to define a special area where different rules applied (lethal force against intruders?) and to demonstrate tenure of the surrounding lands. But we come back to the same question—why only at this time? Why during the seventh and eighth centuries did ringforts spread like a rash all over the landscape? Maybe in the question lies an unfortunate clue to an unseen factor that had a major role.

Attempts have been made to link times of good and bad environmental conditions with changes in human society and economy. In particular there is the possibility that periods of poor weather led to poor harvests, shortages of food, famine, lowering of resistance to disease, and vulnerability to widespread pestilences. Historical records tell us when pestilences ravaged through Europe and detail their effects on terrified populations. The first historic plague (the Justinian, named after the emperor who was infected by it) was an outbreak of bubonic plague, which came to Ireland in AD 544 and decimated the people over several years. Several further pestilences are recorded from the mid-500s. Another severe outbreak of plague hit Ireland in 664. The devastating effects of this outbreak in Britain were recorded by the Venerable Bede, who said that the pestilence was equally virulent in Ireland. The annals mention several further epidemics, for example in 683 (probably a recurrence of bubonic plague) and in 700, when 'famine and pestilence prevailed in Ireland so that man ate man' (see table, left). Also in 700 a murrain of cattle broke out that recurred in subsequent years. There were outbreaks of what was probably smallpox in 554 and 950.

Apart from the obvious suffering and loss of life, the effects of these epidemics on the population could be divided into two





Left: A depiction of the advance of bubonic plague in Europe.

main types. First, those that arose as an inevitable consequence, such as lowering of population and freeing up of resources, and second, those that were a voluntary reaction among survivors, such as changing life patterns to lessen the impact of further outbreaks, in so far as the spread of infection was understood. The plagues could have played a part in the sudden desire of that section of the population of Ireland that could afford to do so to secure themselves in ringforts. This possibility focuses attention on the chronology of ringfort construction and use and on the ancient population's assumptions about the mechanisms of the spread of plague and other pestilences. Clearly, the advent of the first plague in the 540s cannot have been anticipated; there had not been a Europe-wide pandemic in the few preceding centuries, perhaps in part because the black rat that is thought to have carried the plague

had only recently spread across Europe. The effects of the plague and its recurrences must have been appalling. Overall, estimates suggest that at least 25% of the population would have been swept away. The people would not have known much about the mechanism of the spread of disease, but fear would have spontaneously given rise to a desire for isolation—to avoid transmission by contact with other people, particularly outsiders and wanderers, whether or not this was the main vector. It may be that experience of the first plague indicated that small isolated communities had better chances of avoiding infection than those who lived in more populous areas where there were travellers, for example in and around ports and at major ecclesiastical sites.

It may be that the construction of crannogs and (less well dated) 'duns' of the élite was in part triggered by fears arising from the first plague of the 540s. The construction of the commoner ringforts of the landholding, farming class may have been delayed while a social reorganisation resulting from the decimation of population by the first plague took place. Or it could be that the main stimulus for ringfort construction by the free farmers had to await the impact of the second major outbreak of plague in 664. If the ringfort settlement form represents (in part) a defence against diseases and famine, the population would have been caught out by the first few outbreaks and would have created their enclosed settlements as a reaction to them on the assumption that there would be more. This seems to fit with the emerging chronology of ringfort construction and use, with most being constructed and occupied in the late seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, after the first major outbreaks but at a time when frequent pestilences, famines and cosmological portents continue to be recorded in the annals.

This interpretation of the rationale behind the widespread building of ringforts fits better with some aspects of their construction and layout than considerations of military defence and status alone. We know from written sources that coherent communities of relatives who farmed in cooperation lived in ringforts in rural landscapes. The ringfort-dwellers did not (normally) need defence against neighbours who were relatives and friends and who, when mustered as a community, would have provided some defence against marauders. In times of recurring famine and plague, however, the ability to control access by unwanted individuals, be they strangers, neighbours, relatives or even infected animals, to the homestead and family may well have been considered as a sensible defence against a terrifying enemy that was otherwise invisible.

It could be argued that perimeter defence against disease or theft in times of famine did not require to be so monumental, but once defence became necessary other factors may have come into play—for example, use of the enclosure to demonstrate status, or copying the sacred form of ecclesiastical enclosures for talismanic purposes and to invoke divine protection. ■

Left: A ringfort at Lisbride, Co. Roscommon. (Photo: courtesy of the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government)