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The Archaeological Survey of Co. Tipperary

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Introduction

The Sites and Monuments Record for Co. Tipperary which was completed by the Office of Public Works in 1992 is designed primarily as a tool for planning authorities and for government and other agencies involved with environmental change.¹ Its primary aim is to assist in the preservation of the archaeological heritage of the county. It will enable authorities to see at a glance whether a particular development will affect a monument or area of archaeological importance, and so take appropriate steps to prevent destruction.

The S.M.R. for Co. Tipperary was compiled from sources which include maps, documentary evidence and photographs. Aerial photographs form an important component of the survey, resulting in 482 newly discovered areas of archaeological interest. These vary in extent from a single small enclosure, to an archaeological complex such as that at Moanmore [S.M.R. 65:34] which includes field systems and enclosures extending over approximately 200 acres.

Sources

Vertical and oblique aerial photographs were consulted. The main source of oblique aerial photographs is the Cambridge Collection of Aerial Photographs [C.U.C.A.P.] taken during a programme of flying in the summer months between 1963 and 1973. Additional oblique photographs were provided by Ms. Gillian Barrett, Mr. Aidan McDonald, Ms. Daphne Pochin Mould and Mr. Leo Swan. Vertical aerial photographs studied include the Geological Survey of Ireland collection [1:30,000] taken between 1973 and 1977, Air Corps [c. 1:10,560] taken during the 1950s, and photographs from the Ordnance Survey of Ireland [1:4,000 to 1:20,000] taken between 1980 and 1990.

Results

Of a total of 482 sites discovered from aerial photographs, at least sixty per cent survive as earth works; the remainder show as crop or vegetation marks. Eighty per cent of the sites occur below the 500' contour, and 70% occur between 200' and 500'. The relative absence of new sites from upland areas is partly due to extensive forestry in recent years, particularly in the south of the county.

A large proportion of the sites are circular or oval enclosures, most of which range from 30 to 45 metres in diameter. These are defined by a ditch, or bank and ditch, and in some cases are associated with field systems, for example at Kilross/Ballywire [S.M.R. 66:121]. Many will probably, as a result of field work, be identified as ringforts. A fine example of a tri-vallate enclosure at Suirville [S.M.R. 68:41] was identified by Gillian Barrett during aerial survey in 1991.

Nine enclosures were particularly large, ranging from 120 metres to 210 metres in diameter. Larger than the average ringfort and (with one exception) located below 500', two are located





Plate 1. Aerial photograph showing the hillfort in Curraghadobbin townland. (S.M.R. 79:24). The remains of two roughly circular stone ramparts are clearly visible on the west side, and on the east side the modern field boundary follows the line of the outer bank. The remains of a cairn can be seen at the centre of the hillfort.

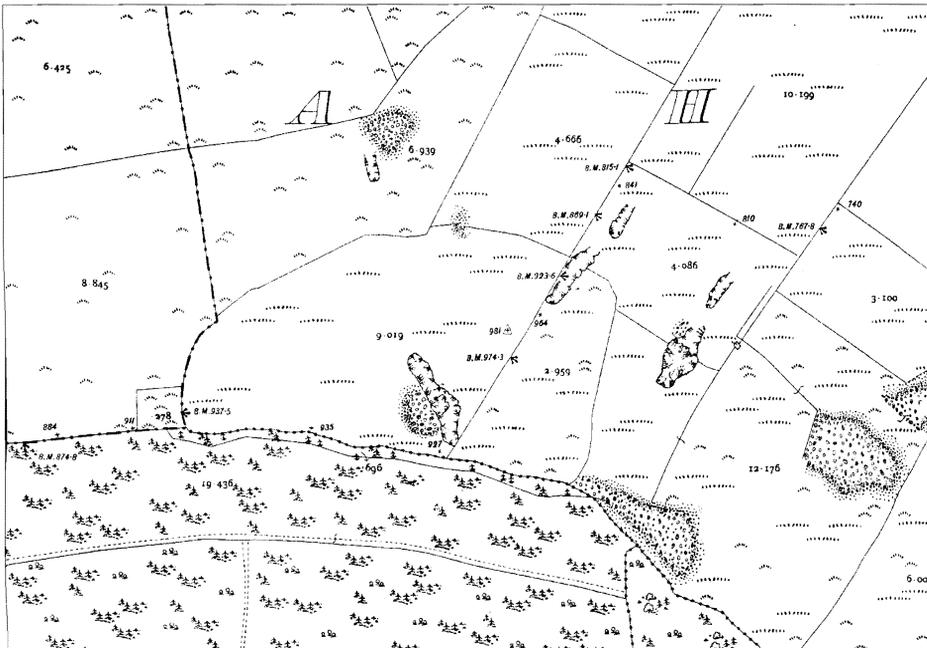


Fig. 1. Detail of O.S. 25'' Sheet 79:6 showing the outline of the hillfort in Ahenny townland (S.M.R. 79:27). (Reproduced courtesy of the Board of Trinity College Dublin. O.S. Permit no. 5884).

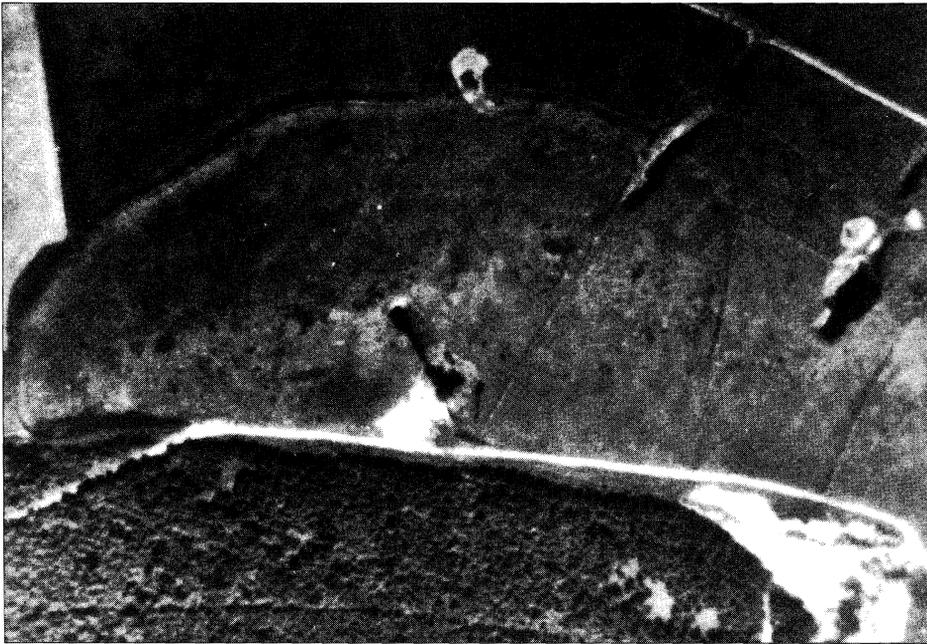


Plate 2. Aerial photograph showing the hillfort in Ahenny townland (S.M.R. 79:27). The rampart can be seen clearly along the northern and western perimeters of the site, but is obscured by forestry along the southern boundary.

on a rise or ridge. While none are associated with churches, their size and location suggests they may be ecclesiastical enclosures, or low-lying hillforts as at the Naul, Co. Dublin,² and Ballinkillin, Co. Carlow.³

Some of these enclosures, e.g. at Tullowcossaun [S.M.R. 63:651 and Ballytohil LS.M.R. 71:39], are outlined or partly outlined on the O.S. 6" sheets, surviving as field boundaries, and have been positively identified as archaeological sites on aerial photographs. Others, such as Kilmakil [S.M.R. 42:15] and Ballybrada [S.M.R. 81:39], were revealed as crop marks.

Nineteen square or rectangular enclosures may be moated sites. Four of these, at Tulla [S.M.R. 65:18], Nickeres [S.M.R. 66:32], and Lissobihane [S.M.R. 66:39, 66:146], all located near Emly in the south west of the county, are associated with other archaeological features, including field systems.

A minimum of 19 field systems were identified in different parts of the county. Some sites, e.g. at Kilross/Ballywire [S.M.R. 66:121], and at Bartoose [S.M.R. 65:14, 65], consist of two or more field boundaries, sometimes associated with enclosures. Other sites, e.g. at Moanmore [S.M.R. 65:34] (described below), and at Oldtown [S.M.R. 29:51], are more extensive. Oldtown probably refers to the settlement revealed on aerial photographs and only hinted at on the map. The site, which covers approximately 170 acres, consists of trackways, enclosures. and a series of cultivation ridges which in some cases are enclosed within field boundaries.

Two hillforts (and possibly a third) were identified in the south of the county, north of Carrick-on-Suir. One [S.M.R. 79:24] is located in Curraghadobbin townland. (Plate 1) It consists of two concentric stone banks which enclose an area about 180 metres in diameter. The outer bank survives on the east side as a field boundary. At the centre is a cairn or small stone enclosure. There is possibly a third (outer) bank and some hints of a field system to the south.





Plate 3. Aerial photograph showing some of the ringditches in Ballynagrana townland. (S.M.R. 66:92)

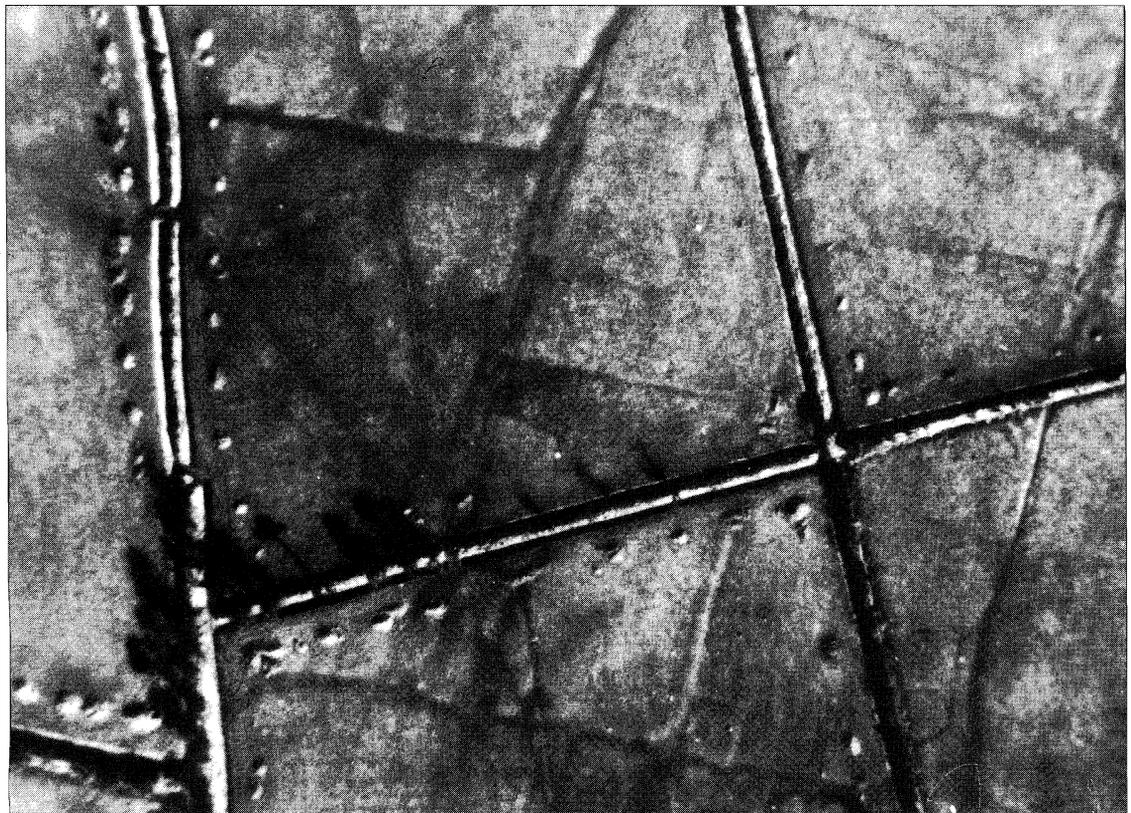


Plate 4. Aerial photograph showing part of the field system in Moanmore townland. (S.M.R. 65:34). The modern field boundaries cut across the older field system which incorporates a small square enclosure, seen in the lower part of the photograph.

The second hillfort is located west of Ahenny townland [S.M.R. 79:27]. (Plate 2 and Fig. 1) The limits of the site correspond roughly to the 900' contour. The southern boundary of this earthen-banked oblong enclosure follows a ridge which also forms the townland boundary. The site extends east along this ridge for about a quarter of a mile.

Both of these sites were identified on Air Corps photographs [V/312 3074-3077]. The area has been extensively planted with trees since these photos were taken. There is no sign of the site at Curraghadobbin on G.S.I. aerial photographs, and the only hint of the hillfort at Ahenny is a gap in the trees along part of the western or north-western boundary. There are suggestions on the map of other possible hillforts and enclosures, but widespread forestry planting in recent years makes it impossible to confirm this.

Emly

Examination of aerial photographs revealed a spectacular complex of archaeological sites near Emly, in the south-west of the county [O.S. 6" Sheets 65/66]. In an area bounded by the border with Limerick in the west and the village of Lattin in the east, encompassing about 10 square miles, over 92 new sites were identified. (Fig. 2) Situated between 300' and 500', these include enclosures, mounds, ring ditches and field systems. On the constraint maps, for convenience, some individual site numbers incorporate a number of enclosures, etc. For example, S.M.R. 65:34 at Moanmore includes enclosures, ringditches, and an extensive field system, and S.M.R. 66:92 at Ballynagrana includes 16 ringditches, so the actual number of sites exceeds 160, more than doubling the number of recorded sites in this area.

A total of 140 of these sites are ring ditches, i.e. small circular enclosures defined by a ditch and about 7 metres in diameter. (Plate 3) These are distributed throughout the area in question, but there are significant concentrations in Ballyholahan, Moanmore and Ballynagrana townlands. (Plate 3) The sites occur singly and in clusters. The excavation evidence suggests that they are funerary in nature.

In the 1930s Professor Sean P. Ó Riordáin came across a large number of similar sites in the Limerick/Tipperary area and excavated 21 of them, including one at Ballynagrana [S.M.R. 66:94].⁴ Only one site, at Lissard, Co. Limerick, produced evidence which could be dated, i.e. the remains of a decorated urn which had been placed over a small quantity of cremated bone. Differences in soil and the presence of charcoal suggested that a large wooden object, possibly a canoe, had been placed alongside the urn. The latter was dated typologically to the Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age. Ó Riordáin suggested that the absence of archaeological material from the remaining sites may be due to a combination of acid soils and the slightness of the raised area, which would give little protection to the burials.

During the course of field work in the area a number of these sites were visited. Although clearly visible on aerial photographs [O.S. 4/2428-37, etc.], they are not immediately obvious on the ground. The ditch was revealed by irises in grassland, or by relatively dark vegetation in fields where the grass had recently been cut. As Professor Ó Riordáin remarked, the monuments are such that "one might easily walk over them without noticing them". A group of ten ring ditches and a field system were located at Lisduff Bridge [S.M.R. 43:19] as a result of aerial survey by J. K. S. St. Joseph, and three ring barrows were recorded at Graignoe [S.M.R. 43:19] south of Holycross by the same source, and field work in 1991 revealed them to be very substantial earth works.⁵

In addition to, and possibly related to, the ring ditches in the Emly area are the extensive field systems in the same area which were detected on aerial photographs. These vary from



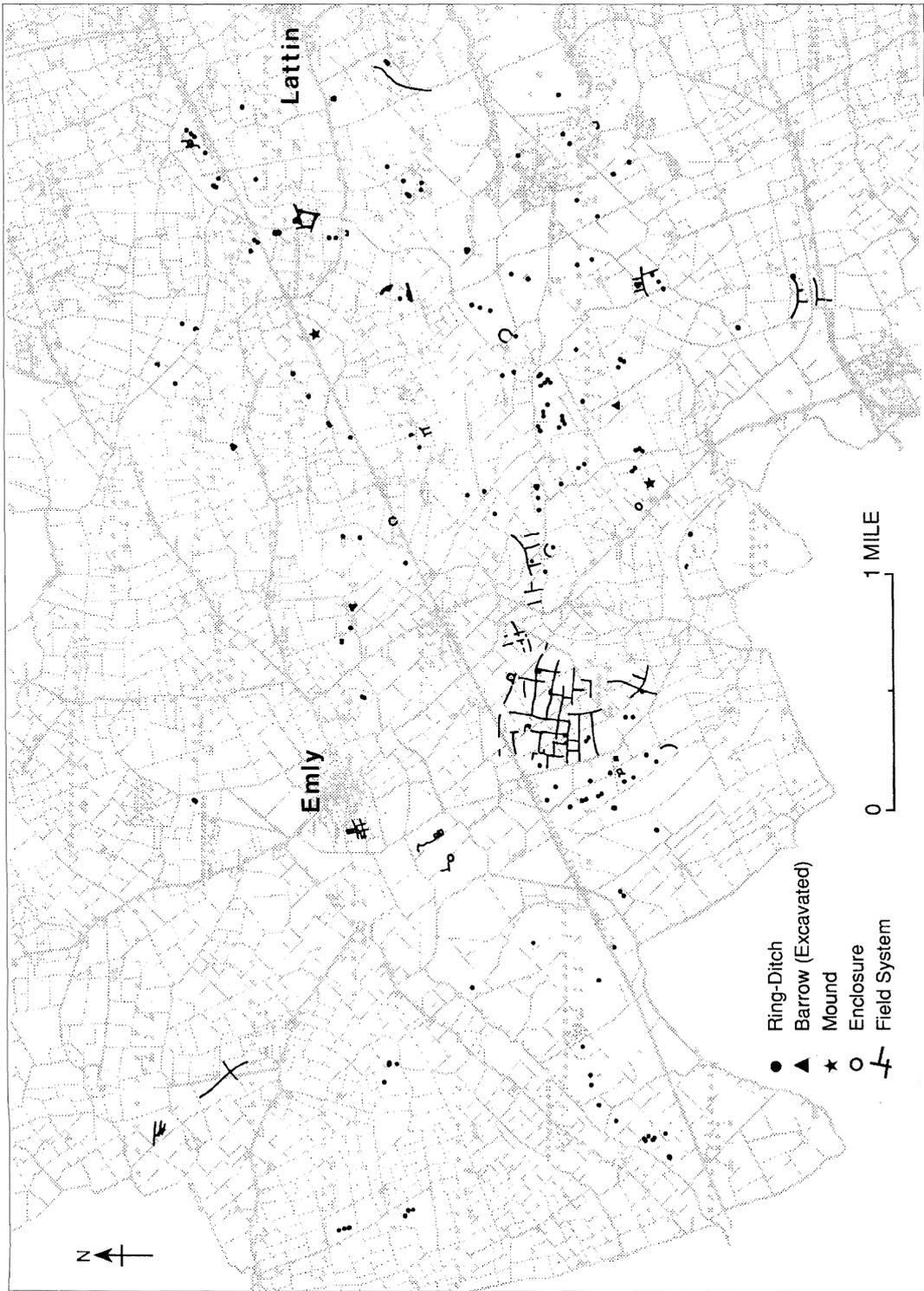


Fig. 2. Distribution Map of the archaeological sites in the environs of Emly identified on aerial photographs and described in the text. These include funerary monuments and settlements of possible Late Bronze Age date.

fragments of old field systems, such as that at Kilross or Bartoose, to the very extensive site at Moanmore [S.M.R. 65:34] extending over 200 acres. (Plate 4) The latter could best be described as grid-like, and is orientated roughly north/south, while the existing field system is orientated north-west/south-east. Two small square enclosures (both less than 100' x 100') are incorporated (in different parts of the system) in the junction of two field boundaries. Four ring ditches were identified within this system; but the relationship between the two is not clear.

The discovery of this archaeological landscape adds considerably to our knowledge of early settlement in this area. Apart from increasing the number of recorded sites by over a half, it brings to our attention the type of Late Bronze Age/Early Iron Age burial mound or barrow, recorded nearly 60 years ago by Ó Riordáin. The fact that these monuments are difficult to spot on the ground emphasizes the necessity of aerial survey as an essential part of archaeological survey. Our knowledge of this archaeological landscape near Emly described above derives entirely from aerial photographs and is restricted to the area covered by these photographs. However, a further programme of aerial survey in adjoining areas and in the rest of the county, conducted in optimum conditions, would result in further discoveries and would be the most useful way of recording these monuments.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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FOOTNOTES

1. Stout, G.: *Sites and Monuments Record for Co. Tipperary*, Office of Public Works, 1991.
2. Keeling, D.: "A Group of Tumuli and a Hillfort near Naul, Co. Dublin", in *J.R.S.A.I.* CXIII (1983) pp. 67-74.
3. Condit. T. & Gibbons, M.: "Two Hillforts at Knockscur and Ballinkillin, Co. Carlow", in *Carloviana*, No. 34, 1986/87.
4. Ó Riordáin, Seán P.: "Excavations at Lissard, Co. Limerick, and other sites in the locality", in *J.R.S.A.I.* LXVI (1936).
5. Norman, E. R. & St. Joseph, J. K. S.: *The Early Development of Irish Society* (Cambridge, 1969).

