

Excavations at Caherconnell Cashel, the Burren, Co. Clare: implications for cashel chronology and Gaelic settlement

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Abstract

Caherconnell Cashel is one of several hundred stone ring-forts distributed across the Burren, Co. Clare. Unlike the majority of these smaller sites, Caherconnell measures over 40m in diameter, and is enclosed by 3m-high walls in a good state of preservation. The cashel's location along a natural routeway, evidence for continued use of the immediate area for settlement over a long period, and excavated remains all point to the elevated status of this site. A series of radiocarbon dates place activity at Caherconnell between the tenth and early seventeenth centuries AD, thereby providing new evidence for the dating of such cashels, continuity of occupation and some indication of how wealthy Gaelic families lived in the medieval period.

Introduction

The site at Caherconnell in the Burren, Co. Clare (CL009-03010), is commonly referred to as a cashel, a term implying a dry-stone version of the earthen rath or ring-fort. The typical ring-fort appears to have been built between the sixth and tenth centuries AD to house a farming family and its associated activities. There is, as yet, no discernible difference between the dating of earthen raths and their stone counterparts. Both are generally accepted as being early medieval, with the majority of dated excavated sites built between approximately AD 600 and AD 900 (Stout 1997, 24). There is little, if any, evidence for the construction of ring-forts after the twelfth century. The few sites where construction is dated, by their excavators, to the eleventh century or later are often associated with intrusive Anglo-Norman groups and may, therefore, be seen as something of a departure from the ring-fort tradition. The average earthen ring-fort measures 30–35m in diameter, and its stone equivalent 20–25m. Recent work by the authors at Caherconnell has started to distinguish this site from the general ring-fort type in a number of important ways.

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