

DIGGING DRUMANAGHA Author(s): Christine Baker

Source: *Archaeology Ireland*, Vol. 33, No. 1 (Spring 2019), pp. 26-29

Published by: Wordwell Ltd.

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/26844443>

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DIGGING DRUMANAGH



Christine Baker describes some of the findings from recent excavations at the well-known Dublin promontory fort.

Having grown up down the road and having been a student under the Iron Age scholar the late Professor Barry Raftery, it was always a dream of mine to dig Drumanagh, often described as the most important Iron Age promontory fort on the east coast of Ireland (Fig. 1). Defined by earthen ramparts, the headland has been a designated National Monument since 1977. The site sprang to public prominence in the mid-1990s amidst claims of its being ‘a significant Roman beachhead’. Despite a series of opinion pieces and rebuttals, this resulted in a popular view that the Romans may have landed at this windswept coastal promontory between the villages of Loughshinny and Rush in north County Dublin.

The mythology surrounding the site was compounded by the inaccessibility (owing to legal considerations) of the corpus of c. 150 artefacts, including eighteen Roman bronze coins (AD 81–150), recovered through unauthorised metal-detecting in the 1980s. An examination of the stray finds from the site, which include flint flakes, pottery and an early medieval copper-alloy pin, indicated multi-period settlement, however. The geophysical survey undertaken as part of the Late Iron Age and ‘Roman’ Ireland (LIARI) project 2011–14 by the Discovery Programme also indicated structures and features of differing eras, reflecting the importance of the strategic location of the site. So, too,

did the presence of Martello Tower No. 9. One of twelve Martello towers located along the coast of Fingal, Drumanagh Martello tower was positioned on the promontory in 1804/5 ‘for the defence of Rush Strand and River, the pier and cover at Drummanagh Point’ in the face of potential Napoleonic invasion. It also served as the base for the Preventative Water Guard, who combated smuggling in the 1800s.

Fingal County Council took ownership of the site at the end of 2016. Since then the site has been secured and the available

Above: Fig. 1—Drumanagh promontory fort, looking north (courtesy of the Discovery Programme).



Left: Fig. 2—Digging Trench 2.

Below: Fig. 3—Part of the Digging Drumanagh excavation team.

activities, not least of which is excavation (Fig. 2). As a partnership between community members and professional archaeologists, over 50 members of the local and wider community joined together to undertake the first archaeological excavation at Drumanagh promontory fort over two weeks in May 2018 (Fig. 3). The focus of the excavation was the nineteenth-century road to the Martello tower and the effect of its construction on the layers below. Two trenches were hand-dug across the line of this road, the second where the road appeared to intersect the paling of the tower (Fig. 4).

Martello road

The 'Right of Road' or 'War Department Right of Way' is depicted on the 1850 and 1859 (published 1862) Royal Engineer Corps maps for Drumanagh. It extends from the stone piers that mark the former gates, through the prehistoric ramparts and across the headland to the land-take of the Martello tower. The excavation revealed that the roadway, clearly visible on the ground as a hollow road between two parallel low banks, had been constructed by simply digging into sod and topsoil and casting it up onto banks. It had been hoped that the base of the road,

knowledge about its history, archaeology and folklore gathered in the *Drumanagh Conservation Study and Management Plan 2018–2023*, which is available to download from the Council's website (www.fingal.ie). Work on realising the objectives of this plan is under way. The Drumanagh Archaeological Advisory Group, comprising members of the National Monuments Service, the National Museum of Ireland (NMI), the Heritage Council, the Discovery Programme and the country's universities, has been formed to help develop the research objectives for the site, while the Council's internal stakeholder group manages ongoing issues.

The ethos of community participation is central both to the management plan and to the future protection of the site. Building on the consultative process with the local community and on the knowledge gaps and opportunities identified, the Digging Drumanagh project was developed. Like the successful

models of Swords Castle: Digging History 2015–2017 and the Bremore Castle Big Dig 2017, Digging Drumanagh is a community-based project with numerous strands of participative, artistic and educational





which measured 4m in width, would have a defined surface such as cobbles, but it appears to have been compact earth. As the roadway approached its terminus at the Martello tower, however, there was a deliberate metallised surface of compact small stones laid and demarcated by a stone kerb. Apparent on the 1850 map is a rectangular structure aligned north-east/south-west that appears to truncate the northern bank of the Martello road, which narrows at this point. It was identified in the trenches as large slabs of limestone and associated nineteenth-century activity, which indicated a structure c. 7.7m in diameter. Detritus left by the occupants of the Martello tower was evident in the animal bone and shell in the deposits outside the structure. Bone-handled knives and fragments of glass bottles, tin-glazed pottery and stems of wine glasses speak of long-ago meals. A belt brace of the Royal Downshire militia (Fig. 5), a brass button of the Royal Artillery (Fig. 6) and a clay pipe decorated with masonic symbols (Fig. 7) denote the presence of the men stationed here.

Above: Fig. 4—Aerial view of the trenches adjacent to the Martello tower (courtesy of the Discovery Programme).

Below: Fig. 5—Belt brace, Royal Downshire militia.

Below right: Fig. 6—Royal Artillery uniform button.



Earlier activity

Both the geophysical survey (NMI, 1999) and aerial photographs from the 1970s and 1980s show a degree of disturbance immediately south of the Martello road. This was reflected in the excavated trenches. The loamy rich soil truncated by the construction of the Martello road contained evidence of that disturbance, as well as evidence for earlier activity. The presence of flint flakes and struck flint was not unexpected, as this coastal zone of Fingal has long produced evidence for the processing of flint of Neolithic and Bronze Age date.





Above: Fig. 7—Clay pipe bowl with masonic mark.

Right: Figs 8a and 8b—Iron Age antler combs.

Below: Fig. 9—Enjoying the Drumanagh findings exhibition in Rush Library.



Promontory forts are generally associated with the Iron Age (c. 500 BC–AD 400) and there are three in close proximity. Drumanagh, encompassing c. 46 acres, is the largest, and visible across the sea on Lambay Island are two further promontory forts, the Garden Fort and Scotch Point. Both Lambay and Drumanagh are connected to the Romanised world, with Drumanagh acknowledged as being of great significance in the context of Romano-British trade along the east coast. A number of artefacts recovered during the dig reflect this dynamic. Two decorated antler combs were recovered from the disturbed soil south of the Martello road, one in each trench (Figs 8a and 8b). The fragments can be categorised as one-piece personal combs of Iron Age date (Dr Fraser Hunter, National Museums Scotland, pers. comm.). Also recovered from the same contexts were part of a striped blue bead, preliminarily identified as a melon bead (first–second century AD) and two fragments of Dressel 20 pottery. These were amphorae used for the transportation of olive oil, produced between the first and third centuries AD in the Roman province of Baetica, southern Spain.

Two fragments of human bone were also recovered from either side of where the Martello road had been inserted. One fragment, identified by Dr Lynda Lynch as part of a femur, returned a calibrated radiocarbon date range of 49 BC–AD 86

(UBA-38843). The second fragment, part of a possible female cranium, returned a calibrated (2-sigma) date range of 170 BC–AD 52 (UBA-38844). Post-excavation analysis is ongoing. The results so far have formed the basis of a small exhibition (Fig. 9), and a programme of field-walking is scheduled for the fields around Drumanagh, as ploughing allows. The ongoing community interest will see pop-up exhibitions at the local schools, and the

history of Drumanagh will be the theme for the St Patrick's Day Parade 2019. Be prepared for Iron Age warrior women and togas parading down the streets of Rush! ■

Acknowledgements

This project is funded by Fingal County Council with support from the Heritage Council. Thanks to my colleagues Finola O'Carroll, Laura Corrway and Ian Kinch, to Dr Fraser Hunter and Dr Linda Lynch, and to all who supported the project by taking part or visiting us. You can see us on <https://www.facebook.com/fingalculturalheritage/>.

