EARLY MEDIEVAL ARCHAEOLOGY IN THE PARISH OF AGHADERG

BY ALEXANDER CUPPLES

In 1987, the first ever volume of *Before I forget* was published by Poyntzpass and District Local History Society and the first article it contained was *"A Tour of the Archaeological Sites in the Parish of Aghaderg"*, written by local headmaster and historian, John Lennon. It is a splendid overview of the main sites in the parish, containing a very comprehensive map, counting 114 archaeological sites in an area 58km2, or 9miles long x 5 miles wide.

25 years later in 2012, I was fortunate to do my undergraduate archaeology dissertation on Medieval Archaeology in Aghaderg Parish (J.A.C. Cupples, 2012) and by this time the number of known archaeological sites (logged by the NIEA) had risen to 153 sites. I have found/'rediscovered'/logged 30 additional archaeological sites, 5 of which were found during the construction of the BGE gas pipeline in 2006, and the Rev.McKibbin, Ballinaskeagh, has recently found evidence of Late Mesolithic activity in Ballinaskeagh, therefore we are still only scratching the surface of human activity in this area.

This article is simply:
1) an introduction and overview of Early Medieval archaeology in Aghaderg, looking at some typical sites.
It will address:
2) the beginning of Christianity in Aghaderg
3) explain the different theories behind Aghaderg's name
4) explain why there are so many Early Christian sites here.

I will use this opportunity to publish snippets of information crucial to the advancement of the study of Early Medieval settlement, namely, the inter-relationship of raths and relating the archaeology to the proto-history of the time.

Early Medieval Period
This period, also called the Early Christian period, began with the arrival of Christianity in the 400s AD, shortly before the arrival of Saint Patrick and ended with the coming of the Anglo-Normans in 1169AD. It marked one of Ireland's two 'golden ages' (the other being the Bronze Age, 2000-600BC), when Europe was in the Dark Ages after the collapse of the Roman Empire and Ireland was the land of saints and scholars, its riches enticing the Viking Norse and Danes to invade after 795 AD. The archaeological monuments which remain from this period are typically raths (known as 'ringforts' in the South, and known locally as 'forths') (fig.1), cashels (stone-built raths), crannogs (man-made islands), souterrains (man-made caves which are basically secret cellars), Irish high crosses and ecclesiastical sites.

Fig.1: Depiction of what a typical rath could have looked like.

Early Medieval Period in Aghaderg Parish

Of Aghaderg's known 190 archaeological sites, c.110 are Early Christian in date and consist of:
• At least 97 raths
• At least 4 crannogs
• At least 2 separate Early Christian ecclesiastical sites, plus associated monuments
• At least 2 souterrains
• The Dane's Cast, which predates the Early Christian period but would undoubtedly have been used during this period. This monument is of national importance but is a large enigma, therefore there is not enough space to discuss this in the present article.
• The Slighe Midhluachra, an Iron Age-Early Christian equivalent of the A1 dual carriageway!

Aghaderg's Raths

Raths are the most common archaeological site in the island of Ireland (over 40,000), with a national average of 0.79 raths/km² (M. Stout, 1997). However, Aghaderg has 1.7 raths/km², making it one of the largest concentrations of raths in a parish in Ireland, especially compared to the rath distribution averages in counties Down and Armagh. In addition, Aghaderg has an unusually large concentration of multivallate raths (raths with more than one bank, which were occupied by nobles or farmers of a higher status than the univallate raths (with one bank) (M. Avery, 1991-1992). In 1940, the Preliminary Survey of Ancient Monuments in Northern Ireland (D.A. Chart et al., 1940) describes the group of raths in Lisnagade townland as part of the largest concentration of raths East of the Dane's Cast and Glen-Righe (the valley of the Newry Canal), along with a group of 10 *"very strongly entrenched forts"* in, and surrounding, Aghaderg. West of Aghaderg, the closest "very strongly entrenched" rath is Lisleitrim, near the Monaghan border, 23 miles away. To top it all off, Aghaderg contains the *"largest and most firmly entrenched rath in Ulster, if not in all Ireland"* (ibid.) – Lisnagade, translated *"fort of the hundred(s)"*.

Why is there such a concentration of raths in Aghaderg, many of which are defensive and high-status, compared with other parishes in counties Down and Armagh? This will be addressed below after a look at some of Aghaderg's typical Early Christian sites.

Tierny Forth

Tierny Forth is a platform counterscarp rath (a rath which has been significantly heightened above the exterior field surface with an internal bank, a middle ditch and an external bank), situated in the townland of Lisnatierny which translates as *"Fort of the Lord"*. This townland is definitely named after this rath because it is situated on a prominent location, visible for miles around, is heightened, and has more than one bank. Additionally, its internal diameter of 57m is much larger than other raths and is completely concentric, one of the supposed requirements for a kingly residence (E. MacNeill 1923).

> *"What is due of a king who is always in residence at the head of his túath [kingdom]? Seven score feet [42.56m] of perfect feet are the measure of his stockade on every side. Seven feet [2.13m] are the thickness of its earthwork, and twelve feet [3.65m] its depth. It is then that he is a king, when ramparts of vassalage support him. What is the rampart of vassalage? Twelve feet [3.65m] are the breadth of its opening and its depth and its measure towards the stockade. Thirty feet [9.12m] are its measure outwardly"* (M. Stout, 1997, 113 quoting E. MacNeill, 1923, 305 who translates the Early Christian law tract, the Críth Gablach here)

Fig.2: Aerial photograph of Tierny Fort, taken in 2006 (NIEA MapViewer, 2006)

Rath Groupings

The hierarchy of Irish society was more complex than today's lower-middle-upper class divisions. There were different types of slaves, there were ócaire (unlanded farmers), bóaire (landed farmers), flaith (the ruling elite and noblemen) of different types and the ri (king), who was often subservient to other kings, etc. This hierarchical society is reflected in the types and distribution of the raths. It is likely that most raths would have been inhabited by the ócaire and bóaire and the present author noticed time and time again in Aghaderg parish that raths are often found in groups. Looking further into this, these rath groupings are often in full view of one another because they are often found in bog basins or valleys and this would create a sense of security, and could imply the existence of a closely-knit community. Also, in these groupings, there is often one rath which is noticeably of a higher status. This is demonstrated below in Brickland bog basin, where 34:99, a counterscarp rath, is clearly the principal rath and the other raths are univallate:
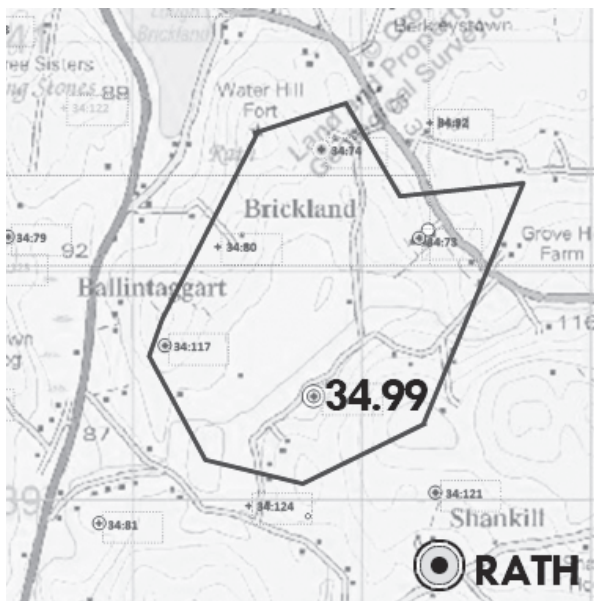

Fig.3: Brickland-Shankill Complex. The line delineates the immediate limit of the raths' view by the tops of the surrounding hills.

Crannogs

Not only are there at least four Early Christian crannogs in Aghaderg, some of them have evidence from Bronze Age occupation too and a lot of artefacts have been found on them during the turf-cutting of the bogs in the 1880s. Now, only Lough Brickland crannog and Lough Shark crannog survive as islands because Loughadian lake and Lisnagonnell bog have been drained. In total, so far, 7 dug-out canoes have been discovered from Loughadian and Lisnagonnell crannogs (plus one from Meenan bog), one being 25 feet long! See fig.5.Unfortunately, all of these logboats are now untraceable and probably disintegrated as they were kept by collectors but it is possible that some of them could be kept in Dublin with the curators not knowing where they came from.

Fig.4: Lough Brickland crannog.

Descriptions of the 25 foot canoe found
25ft. Long, 3ft wide in one end, 2ft, 8in.in the other (H.W. Lett, 1895a, 153); "Both bow and stern are bluffly rounded, and the keel projects eight inches at either end, reminding one on a small scale of the rams of our modern warships; the bow-end projection has through it a hole measuring six inches by three inches, by which it could have been moored." (ibid.)...hollowed out of a tree c.4ft wide (ibid.)...."There are one and a-half pairs of brackets left projecting on the inside, each measuring five inches by three inches, and which must have been for supporting seats. One pair is six feet from the widest or stern end of the canoe, and the other three feet from them. Each has a half-inch horizontal groove in it, evidently for sliding the seat-board into. Immediately between these was found a portion of the handle and blade of a paddle, but it was so much decayed that it got broken when turned out with the spadefuls of bog-earth, and crumbled to pieces when handled" (ibid.)...." The shell or hull of the canoe is three-quarters of an inch thick at the gunwale, while the floor is seven inches thick near the bow, and three inches thick at the position of the seats. A feature in this canoe is that on the bottom were left of the substance of the oak stout ridges as "stretchers" for the paddlers' feet to rest against. At the proper distance from where each seat was placed there are a pair of these for each two paddlers feet, who sat side by side on each seat. And there is a pair about half-a-yard from the bow, which I take for the places of those canoe men who steered as well as impelled the boat." (ibid, 154); Stretchers (which support the sailor's feet) were found at the bottom (H.W. Lett, 1895b)

EARLY CHRISTIAN AGHADERG

At present, the earliest written or archaeological evidence of Christianity in Aghaderg is from the early
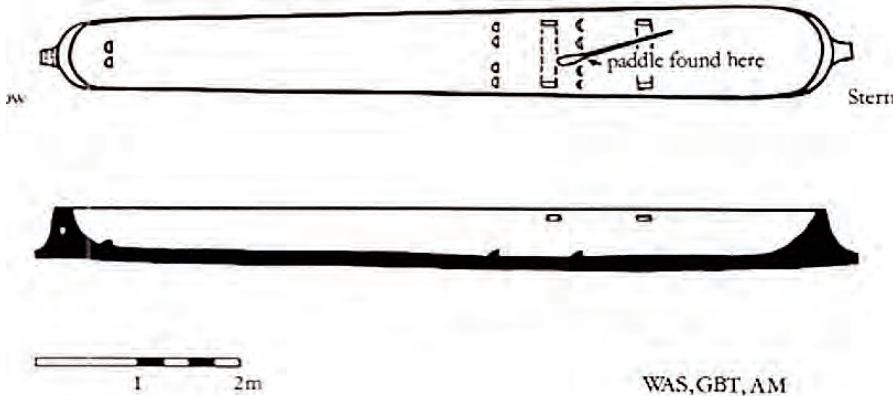

Fig.5: Drawing of logboat by Fry (2000, fig.30) (F.2 in Cupples, 2012) from Lett's descriptions (H.W Lett, 1895a, 153-154; H.W. M.F. Lett, 1895b).

600s AD, from the written accounts of the life of Saint Fursa (also called Saint Fursey), a missionary from Co.Louth, famous for his visions and missions to Anglo-Saxon England and northern Gaul. Saint

Fig.6: Photograph of what little is left above ground of Drumsallagh monastery complex. The mound in the right is the mother parish church with the river on the right.

Fursa was trained by the bishop, Saint Mellan (sometimes called Meldan) in the early 600s AD (P. Ó'Riain, 2011), and the latter was buried at Drumsallagh Monastery Complex, along with saints Beoan and Nassad (W. Reeves, 1847).

What is Drumsallagh Monastery Complex you might ask? This was located on land currently owned by Norman Megaw's, Drumsallagh, and contained 1) an Early Christian church, 2) the site of the mother parish church of Aghaderg, 3) a probable 3rd order Franciscan friary, 4) an Abbey House, 5) a modern

graveyard, 6) 2 ancient wells. A complex site indeed, therefore just an overview is given here. Early Christian Irish literature provides 5 different names for possible churches in Aghaderg parish:

• *"Tamlachtu a farrud Locha Bricrenn"*, translated as *"Tamlachta near Loch Bricrenn"* (Martyrology of Aengus, translated by W. Stokes, 1905, transcribed from the Laud 610 MS). This 'Martyrology' (a calendar of feast days in honour of saints) was originally written around 800 AD.

• *"Tamlachtan mic ua Caill il-Loch Bricrenn"*, translated as *"Tamlachta Maccu-cuill on Loch Bricrenn"* (Martyrology of Aengus, translated by W. Stokes, 1905, transcribed from the Laud 610 MS).

• *"Tamlachta Menna in Huib Echach Ulad"* (in Iveagh barony) and *"Tamlachta Mennann ie Loch Bricrend"* (Martyrology of Aengus, translated by W. Stokes, 1905, transcribed from the Rawlinson 1 and Rawlinson 2 MSS respectively)

• *"Tamhactain humail ic Loch Bricrenn"* (Martyrology of Tallaght translated by M. Kelly, 1857). This roughly translates as *"Tamlacht Umhail i.e. Loch Bricrenn."* This Martyrology was written in the early 800s as well, alongside the Martyrology of Aengus.

• *"Tamhlacht na-min"* (C.J. Robb, 1938, *"The Red Field"*, quoting an unknown MS by Dr. Shiel, a previous rector of St. Mellan's Church of Ireland).

Tamlacht is a plague monument but most of the Tamlachta above are the names of churches. Loch Bricrenn can only be the lake, Lough Brickland. There are no other place names in Ireland which can be easily confused with Loughbrickland. In my thesis (2012), the conclusion reached was that there were at least two different church sites, one being at Drumsallagh Monastery (probably Tamlacht, Tamlacht Meenan, Tamlacht na-min and Tamlacht Umhail names) and one being on the crannog of, or on the shore of, Lough Brickland (Tamlacht Maccu-cuill) because its positioning "on" Lough Brickland. Another phenomenon which would support this theory is the large variety of names. P.S. Dineen (1927) translates Umhail as a "notice" or "to heed". I can think of no other explanation for this name other than it emphasising the naming of this tamlacht as a plague burial. This theory is plausible because the annals record three huge plagues in Early Christian Ireland:

1. c.543 AD – Blefed, which killed "the noblest third of the human race" (W. MacArthur, 1948). This is

called the Plague of Justinian in England (ibid.)

2. c.550-555 AD - Buidhe Chonaill, i.e. the "yellow pestilence" (W. MacArthur, 1948), with symptoms similar to jaundice, resulting in people "falling asleep" (W. Hennessy, 1887)

3. c.664-669 AD – Bede's Plague, and again, referred to as Buidhe Chonaill (W. MacArthur, 1948). Read the following accounts from the Annals of Ulster:

• In 663 AD, "Darkness on the Kalends of May, at the ninth hour; and in the same summer the sky seemed to be set on fire. A pestilence reached Ireland on the Kalends of August." Many nobles died (W. Hennessy, 1887)

• 664 AD "A great mortality", when nobles are listed as "falling asleep", dying from "the same distemper, i.e., of the 'Buidhe chonaill'" (W. Hennessy, 1887)

• 666 AD "A great mortality in Ireland" (W. Hennessy, 1887)

• 667 AD "A great mortality" (W. Hennessy, 1887)

• 669 AD "A great famine" occurs after much snow (W. Hennessy, 1887)

The reader would be justified in thinking that all of these tamlacht names could simply refer to glorified graveyards and not churches but all of these tamlachta except Tamlacht na Min, are mentioned as a home-base of Aghaderg's three saints: Mellan, Beoan and Nassad, therefore they must have been churches named after plague burials. As a side-note, there are only 3 other places in Ireland with such a high concentration of places named after plagues and one of these areas is Ballymore Parish, i.e. Tandragee (G. Haley, 2002), the capital of an enemy territory, Orior, only a day's journey away by foot. This could indicate a relatively high population density compared with the rest of Ireland (and perhaps poorer hygiene?).

Maccu-cuill could be interpreted as "Mac Cuill", which sounds like a name, therefore this church could have been named after Mac Cuill. The Irish placenames expert Dr. Joyce translates Tamlacht na-min as *"plague monument of the hill top"* and is of the opinion that it is of pagan origin (ibid.) but it could also be translated as *'plague monument of the flour/meal'* or the *'smooth plague monument'* (P.S. Dineen, 1927).

Having discussed the origins of the parish name, we return to the beginning of Christianity in Aghaderg. It must have reached here earlier than the 600s AD because: 1) Aghaderg is situated right between churches in Donaghmore and Dromore which date to the 400s and 500s AD respectively, 2) the Donaghmore to Dromore road (part of the Slighe Midhluahcra) would have gone through Aghaderg according to local tradition, and 3) St. Patrick in the 400s AD would probably have walked from Downpatrick to Armagh through Aghaderg, which according to local tradition, was also an ancient road.

The earliest known archaeological evidence for Christianity in Aghaderg is two carved crosses at

Drumsallagh Monastery Complex, both dating to the 700s-800s AD, and a cast bronze bell, also from the same site, which could date anywhere from the 600s to 1100 AD (according to C. Bourke, 1980).

THE ORIGIN OF THE NAME "AGHADERG"

For over 1000 years Christians have inhabited this peaceful valley in Drumsallagh but the monastery complex has not had an entirely peaceful history. The

Fig.7: Photograph of the back of the Drumsallagh Monastery bell, taken by A.Cupples in the Ulster Museum, in February, 2012.

parish name "Aghaderg" is Irish for the "*red/bloody field/ford*" and there are two main theories as to how this came about:

1) The site of the Battle of Achadh Leith-dheirg, part of the Battles of the 3 Collas, 332 AD. There has been many a bloody battle in this parish, evident in the townland name Ballyvarley (townland of the slaughter, which can also be interpreted as "O'Marley's townland" (K. Muhr, 1996), but I am not convinced by Muhr's arguments because there is no record of O'Marleys living in Co.Down.

A past rector of Aghaderg claims that the old name for Scarva townland was Clogh-na-varley, "Stone of the Slaughter" and it contains a huge standing stone

called Cloghmore, *"big stone"* (H.W. Lett et al., 1896). In fact, there are many written references to Scarva townland being called Clonknaverly, which K. Muhr (1996) translates as *"meadow of the stalk/skeleton"* and it is possible that Canon Lett misread this. However, being a resident local rector and president of the Royal Societies of Antiquaries of Ireland, who published a lot of local history, this rector should have known the importance of accurately recording local pronunciations. He would have known his parish well, and was therefore probably accurately quoting his parishioners' pronunciation of it.

There used to be a huge cairn of stones in Drummiller townland on Dominic Small's land, near where the disused Banbridge-Scarva railway crosses the river under a bridge. It was "60 feet high and 226 feet in circumference" (S. Lewis 1837 and S. Lewis, 1847, Vol.2) and was quarried away to use as ballast for the Banbridge-Scarva railway. Its first clear appearance in the history books in 1830, quoting local tradition, states that it was "said to be a monument erected after a battle" (G.A. Bennett, 1830, Drummillar). John Lennon, in the first ever article of Before I Forget, 1987, is convinced that this is the Cairn Eochaidh (Eochy's Cairn) which was built in commemoration of one the victorious 3 Collas who died in this battle and was mentioned in some of the ancient annals. However, most annals which record this event, including the earliest known source, Annals of Tigernach, written by 1088, place this event in Fermoy (C. O'Connor, 1825, Vol.2), which most historians e.g. J. O'Donovan (1849) interpret as being Farney barony, Co. Monaghan. Regrettably, there is too much information to discuss all arguments in the current article.

2) A Viking raid in 832 AD on Drumsallagh Monastery Complex. This theory is put forward by two sources alone, which claim to be citing local tradition, recorded by a previous rector of St.Mellan's Church of Ireland, Dr. Shiel, in 1794-1795:
"several holy Men and Monks were murdered by the Danes in said old Monastery and that the Danes destroyed the same as also the Church'; and hence the said Tradition further adds, 'that the Place (where this Tragedy was acted) was afterwards called Aghdurg i.e. the red or bloody Ford (as a large Rivulet runs close by the site of the Old Church) and which afterwards gave Name to this Parish; for its old names appears to have been 'Tamlacht-um-Huil" (M. Cahill, 1985)

This theory is supported by the following extract of an account of an invasion of Co. Down in 832 AD by "foreigners" in the Annals of the Four Masters, the characteristics of which are typical of a Norse Viking raid:

832 AD: "The plundering of Loch-Bricrenn, against Conghalach, son of Eochaidh, and he was taken prisoner, and afterwards killed at their ships." (J. O'Donovan, 1849).

Compare this raid with a battle that occurred here in

827AD, where the Vikings were defeated. Obviously, these Vikings had not forgotten that humiliation.

3) There is also a less likely theory put forward by B.J. Mooney, and supported by John Joe Sands (J.J. Sands 1979), who translates Aghaderg as *"field of the wooden church"* but Kay Muhr (1996) convincingly dismisses this translation based on earlier spellings of this place-name which J.J. Sands and B.J. Mooney probably did not have access to.

I am of the opinion that Aghaderg is most likely named after the 832 AD Viking raid and the slaughter of its monks which reputedly turned the river red with their blood because of Dr. Shiel's claim that this is local tradition, recorded by a local rector, and also because this name is not mentioned in any dates after 832 AD by Irish records. The present author nevertheless admits that the Battle of the 3 Collas could still have occurred this far north. If the 3 Collas did not get this far north, long-forgotten history provides us with many other alternative battles which could account for these gruesome place-names of Aghaderg in the Early Christian period:

- In 712 AD - "A battle was fought between the two sons of Bec Boirche and the sons of Beasal, chief of the Iveagh, and the victory was gained by the sons of Breasal." (J. O'Laverty, 1878).
- 771 AD – "a battle was fought by the Airtheara [a sub-kingdom of the Oriel called Orior, in eastern Co.Armagh] and the Ui-Eachdheach Cobha [Iveagh barony]…in which Gormghal, son of Conall Crai, lord of the Cobha, was slain." (H.M.J. O'Hanlon, 1934).
- 796 AD - Eochaidh, son of Fiachna, King of Uladh (the kingdom of counties Antrim and Down), defeated the "people of Iveagh" and killed their king in 796 AD (J. O'Laverty, 1878).
- 827 AD - Vikings defeated at Lough Brickland by Lethlabahr, son of Loingsech, King of Dal-Araidhe (the northern territory of the Kingdom of Uladh in Co.Antrim) (W.W. Seward, 1795, Loughbrickland).
- 989 AD - The King of Uladh led an expedition into Kinel-Owen, (Co. Tyrone) probably via Aghaderg, where he lost O'Haidith, one of his chiefs (of Ui Eachach Cobha) (J. O'Laverty, 1878).
- 998 AD - Hugh O'Neill of the Kinel-Owen, plundered the kingdom of Ui Eachach Cobha (equal with the Presbytery of Iveagh and Diocese of Dromore) and carried off a great cattle spoil (J. O'Laverty, 1878).
- 1004 AD - "A battle was gained at Loch-Bricrenn [Loughbrickland] by Flaitlibheartach [King of Ailech], over the Ui-Eathach and the Ulidians, where Artan, royal heir of Ui-Eathach [kingdom of Ui Eachach Cobha], was slain." (J. O'Laverty, 1878).
- 1005 AD - Anarchy reigned in Uladh with kings being slain e.g. King Madagan was slain in the church of St.Brigid after one month's reign in 1005 AD (J. O'Laverty, 1878).
- 1086 AD - The "people of Orier" defeated the

"people of Iveagh" wherein Donnell O'Hateidh was slain" (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1089 AD - The "people of Iveagh" defeated the people of Farney (Co. Monaghan) and slew many of their nobles (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1102 AD - O'Hateidh, Tanist of Iveagh, was killed by the Ulidians and a Kinel-Owen army invaded Magh Cobha (the topographical name of the area covered by the polity of the kingdom of Ui Eachach Cobha) but was defeated at night (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1103 AD - O'Brien sent men from Munster, Connaught, Meath and Ossary to Magh Cobha to protect Uladh and Donnell MacLoughlin, who won a great victory by attacking their camp at Magh Cobha, slaying the King of Leinster (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1104 AD - MacLoughlin returned to Magh Cobha (Iveagh barony) and selected three hostages (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1127 AD - Connor MacLoughlin, along with the Dalaradians and the Oriels carried off hostages from the people of Iveagh in Magh Cobha (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1147 AD - "an army was led by Muircheartach [called Murtagh in English], son of Niall O'Loughlin or MacLoughlin and the Kinel-Owen, and Donnchaidh Ua Cearbhail [O'Carrol] and the Airghialla [Oriel] into Ulidia [the kingdom of Uladh]. The Ulidians were encamped at the brink of Uchdearg [Achderg, near Loughbrickland], to meet them; but they abandoned the camp to the Kinel-Owen and the Airghialla, who pursued them till they reached the shore of Dun-droma [Dundrum], in Lecale." (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

Bear in mind that in the time between the Anglo-Norman invasion and the early 1600s, when most of the townland names were first recorded, there were some terrible times in Ireland, with some battles happening in Aghaderg, which could also attribute to these violent names but not the name of Aghaderg, which is recorded from 1147 AD onwards (K. Muhr, 1996). Here are some of these events:

• 1187 AD – "The Danes, who had ravaged the north of Ireland, were defeated here [at the shore of Lough Brickland] by the Irish under Mac Lorriagh, in 1187" (S. Lewis, 1837; S. Lewis, 1847, Vol.2). In this case, I believe that the "Danes" refer to the invading Anglo-Normans who had recently established themselves in nearby Downpatrick because the Danish Vikings did not make significant incursions to Ireland. The Norse Vikings were responsible for all the previous incursions to Aghaderg but their influence declined after settling and the 1014 AD Battle of Clontarf.

• 1188 AD - Donnell MacLoughlin fell in 1188 when pursuing the Anglo-Norman garrison of Moy-Cova (an Anglicisation of Magh Cobha, based in Seafin Castle, Ballyroney), which together with a party from Iveagh, had plundered a district of Tyrone (J. O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1315-1318 AD - Edward the Bruce's invasion of Ireland ending with his death at the Battle of Faughart, 1318 (O'Laverty, 1878).

• 1424 AD - "Another excursion was made by them [the Earl of Ormond in charge of an English army] against Magennis, and they demolished his castle of Loch Bricrenn" ; and killed the Constable of his Gallowglasses [Scottish mercenaries], and almost the whole of the ward in the castle" (J. O'Donovan, 1856)

• 1569 AD– the destruction of the Drumsallagh Monastery Complex by John Brerton (probably Brereton) after the Dissolution of the Monasteries (C.J. Robb, 15th.January 1938 quoting lost MSS by the Rev. John Deth of Aghaderg, 1634 and Dr.Shiel). The owner of Drumsallagh Monastery Complex, Norman Megaw (pers.comm., 2009), recounts local stories of monks and locals being killed in a futile defence of this sanctuary as they refuse to surrender this site to the king.

I have also heard of, but not yet been able to access, a traditional account of an exciting battle occurring on the southern border of Aghaderg parish at the bog at Ouley (in one of the latter volumes of the Banbridge Household Almanac), which could be accounted for by one of the above battles. Even though half of these battles have no mention of Aghaderg or Loughbrickland, it is very likely that most of them occurred in Aghaderg because it is arguably the main entrance into Uladh's enemy territory, Oirghialla, via Scarva, originally called the Bealach-Ultagh, the "Mouth" i.e. Pass, "of Ulster" (W. Harris, 1744 quoting Journal of a March of the Lord Deputy Fitz Waters against the Islanders of the North A.[D.]. 1556, in M.S. in the College Library. E.3.18).

Fig.8: Map showing an approximate boundary for the sub-kingdom of Ui Eachach Cobha as well as the 2 other main sub-kingdoms, these 3 constituting the kingdom of Uladh in c.800 AD (drawn by A. Cupples after G.E. Hamilton, 1913; Byrne, 1973; Robinson, 2000, 64).

WHY IS THERE SUCH A LARGE CONCENTRATION OF HIGH-STATUS EARLY CHRISTIAN SITES AND BATTLES IN AGHADERG?

1. Aghaderg's positioning on the Glen Righe (Valley of the Kings):

This is a large valley extending from Carlingford Lough up to Lough Shark just north of Poyntzpass which, before the construction of the Newry Canal, consisted of large masses of impassable bogs called the Glan Bog, therefore forming a very effective and stable boundary between the rival kingdoms of Uladh in the east and Oirghialla (Oriel) in the west. North of Lough Shark is the River Bann and this long series of waterways provided a good template for the construction of the first summit canal to be built in the British Isles. There are few crossings and the best crossings exist at the highest point at the Glen Righe, at Scarva and Poyntzpass, Scarva more probably being the older one because of its ancient name in 1544 AD (W. Harris, 1744). Aghaderg therefore, with its relatively easily defended choke points into enemy territory, was strategically important to the people of Ui Eachach Cobha, and Uladh.

2. Aghaderg most probably contained a royal capital.

The Kingdom of Uladh used to cover the whole province of Ulster with its capital at Eamhain Macha (Navan Fort), Armagh, but was reduced to the counties of Down and Antrim after the Battle of the 3 Collas in 332 AD. Afterwards, it consisted of 3 main sub-kingdoms, each having their own lord or king, and 'agreed' amongst each other which king should be the Rí Uladh, or king of Ulster, often by force instead of diplomacy. These sub-kingdoms were Dal Fiatach (which is traditionally considered the original and 'true Uladh' of the province of Ulster) and the Dal nAraidhe and Ui Eachach Cobha (later anglicised as "Iveagh"), both of which used to be one nation called the Cruthin, a mysterious race which had their origin in the equally enigmatic Picts of Scotland. Each of these sub-kingdoms had their own royal capital and it is well known that Rath Celtair was the royal rath of the Dál Fiatach and that Rathmore was the royal rath of Dál nAraidhe but no-one knows where Ui Eachach Cobha's royal rath was. In fact, there is an old law tract which states that "every king is a pauper who hath not three chief residences", i.e. three duns or royal raths (R.G. Berry, 1898 quoting O'Curry, MS. H. 3, 18, T.C.D.) and still no-one knows one from Ui Eachach Cobha! From studying Lisnagade's sheer scale, defensive capabilities and the Críth Gablach law tract, Captain R.G. Berry (1898) argues that Lisnagade "must have been an important royal residence, probably only occupied by the Rig (king) during a boundary war, but at all times held by a strong garrison" (R.G. Berry, 1898).

There is not enough room to examine Lisnagade Fort in detail because it has had many uses over the centuries. Nor is there room to explore the possible meanings of its translation *"Fort of the Hundred(s)"* but I will put this new theory forward. In the recently-published A Portrait of West County Down; Past and Present, F.X. McCorry (2013) argues that the "hundred" represents an Irish equivalent of the Anglo-Saxon hundred court, an assembly place for government, levy and administration (P. MacCotter, 2008), mostly all held in the open-air (F.M. Stenton, 1942). I recently came up with the same theory as Francis MacCorry and independent of him when reading P. MacCotter's description of Anglo-Saxon hundreds, which the present author thinks worthwhile to explore here. Early Christian kingdoms (túatha), later became known as trícha cét, "thirty of a hundred", both referring to a political area divided into 30 ballybetaghs (groups of townlands, roughly equivalent to parishes), with the "hundreds" referring to the people (J. MacNeill, 1911-1912), and a levy for 3000 men, and P. MacCotter (2008) argues that the Irish trícha cét is co-terminus with the Anglo-Norman cantred, the Welsh cantref (representing 100 households) and the Anglo-Saxon hundred (representing 100 hides, probably being another levy). I therefore conclude that Lisnagade was for at least a time, an (or the,) administrative capital, and probably the royal capital, of the trícha cét of Ui Eachach Cobha. A topic of study for the future is the possible use of Lisnagade as an Oenagh site, an Irish term for an assembly site because Legananny, a nearby townland, seems to derive its name from the stone of the Oenagh (J. Lennon, 1987).

For a ceremonial and military capital, Lisnagade Fort is well-placed because it is located near Uladh's border with its enemy and its main entrance into the enemy kingdom of Oirghialla over the Glen Righe.

However, these kingdoms did not fight each other non-stop and trade would have probably have played a big part in the lives of Lisnagade's inhabitants. The high number of plague-burial placenames in the enemy capital of Tandragee, as well as near Lisnagade, suggests that these two people groups must have been trading commodities in significant amounts as well as diseases! This royal capital is located not too far away (within 10 miles) of the inauguration site of the kings of Ui Eachach Cobha, Knockiveagh, and also within 10 miles of the Early Christian church of Domhnach Mor Magh Cobha (now St. Bartholomew's Church of Ireland, Donaghmore), which, along with the church at Dromore, arguably formed the 2 most important churches in Ui Eachach Cobha. Drumsallagh Monastery Complex would not have played as big a role as these former churches, but it undoubtedly played an important role to the royals who lived in Lisnagade on one side, and the royals living in the raths in Whyte's Estate, Loughbrickland, on the other side, as well as the surrounding general inhabitants and for providing missions further afield.

3. Aghaderg's positioning on the Slighe Midhluahcra

The Slighe Midhluachra is one of five Iron Age-Early Christian roads leading from the Hill of Tara, Co. Meath, to Dunseverick Castle on the North Coast, mentioned in 123 AD in the Annals of the Four Masters (J. O'Donovan, 1849; H.C. Lawlor; 1938) and its last mention in Irish annals is in 1101 in the Annals of the Four Masters (G.E. Hamilton, 1913, quoting J. O'Donovan, 1849). It is basically the equivalent of today's A1 dual carriageway and probably followed a similar route. No-one knows for sure what its exact route was but there have been some attempts to draw it and all attempts (G.E. Hamilton, 1913; H.C. Lawlor, 1938; C. O'Lochlainn, 1940) bring the Slighe straight through Aghaderg (see map fig.8), with Loughbrickland being a pass through the boggy marshes and hills to the east.

Furthermore, as stated above, there is tradition of an old Downpatrick-Armagh road going through Aghaderg, via the northern edge of Lough Brickland, including at least part of the Ballynanny Road, and would therefore go past Drumsallagh Monastery Complex. To a point, this tradition is supported by the following observation of a line of raths which could have indicated a routeway parallel to this road.

In addition, K. Muhr (1996, 29-30) translates Caskum townland from An Choiscéim, meaning a "footstep", i.e. path. P.W. Joyce (1995, Vol.2, 386) says that céim often refers to a narrow pass between rocks or hills and its conjunction with cos, "foot" also refers to the same.

The linking of this N-S route and Armagh to Downpatrick route, linking the religious capitals of the province of Ulster, would attract settlement, trade and religious activity.

4. Significant Settlement in Aghaderg parish before the arrival of Christianity

One more reason that there are so many raths in Aghaderg parish is that before Christianity arrived, Aghaderg contained significant prehistoric settlements, including:
• A Neolithic settlement
• Numerous Bronze Age settlements and cemeteries
• The Dane's Cast, thought to be Iron Age in date but having definite Neolithic and Bronze Age evidence inside it too. Part of it could be a Neolithic cursus monument, a very rare and significant monument. Other examples of cursus monuments exist at the Hill of Tara and Stonehenge.
• An Iron Age road
• At least 10 megaliths
• A ringbarrow
• A hillfort
• Prehistoric Crannogs
• Late Mesolithic activity

Bear in mind that few monuments survive from the Iron Age all over Ireland and some of these monuments could have been used after the Iron Age. As already mentioned above, the Slighe Midhluachra would have been Iron Age in origin (J. O'Donovan, 1849; H.C. Lawlor; 1938), linking the prehistoric capital of Ireland, the Hill of Tara, with the civilisations to the north. However, this routeway must have been used in much older times in so significant a geographical location with the clear landmarks of the Glenn Righe and the lakes of Lough Brickland, Lough a-Dian and Lough Shark, which also provided reliable food sources. Furthermore, the most significant site here being Lisnagade Fort, has clear prehistoric archaeological evidence, probably Bronze Age in date, if not earlier (J.A.C. Cupples, 2012). It is no wonder then, that these people consolidated their position in Aghaderg and continued living there.

CONCLUSION

Having given an introduction to the Early Medieval Archaeology of Aghaderg Parish, I have argued that this parish has one of the biggest concentrations of Early Medieval settlement in County Down, as well as one of the largest concentrations of high-status Early Medieval sites in all of Ulster.

The earliest definite activity of Christian settlement here is the 600s AD because of the written records but it is likely that there was significant Christian evidence in the 400s-500s AD because of its location between the two main churches of the kingdom of Ui Eachach Cobha. Judging from the large variety of church names and different

Fig.9: Caskum Complex, delineated by the line, superimposed on a map provided by GSNI_Geoindex, 2009, version 2.18.

locations specified in the annals, it is very probable that Aghaderg contained two separate Early Christian church sites, one of which continued in use until the early 1600s AD.

From the sheer volume of sources quoted by K. Muhr, I can conclude without doubt that Aghaderg is translated as the red/bloody field/ford. With regards to the two main theories of how this name came about, I believe that Aghaderg is named after the 832 Viking raid rather than the Battle of the Three Collas because the written evidence which supports this is less ambiguous, these sources take the name Tamlacht Umhail into account, and they are written by local people. I therefore believe that this parish, which seems to be initially named Tamlacht Umhail, changed its name to Aghaderg, the Bloody Ford, after the Vikings sacked Loughbrickland, burning the monastery, and killing its monks, perhaps out of retaliation for their humiliation there a few years earlier. However, if John Deth's or Dr. Shiel's MSS ever appear, they would certainly shed unique light on this subject. Furthermore, Tamlacht Umhail is a very applicable initial name for this parish because the placename evidence suggests that this was one of the worst-hit areas in Ireland by decades of plague.

Finally, I will summarise why there are so many Early Medieval sites, and so many high-status sites in Aghaderg Parish. It is significantly situated at a chokepoint along the Kingdom of Uladh's border with their hostile neighbour, Orior. This gateway into Uladh was worth defending. It is also well-situated along arguably the most important routeway in the province of Ulster and is within a day's journey by foot of the inauguration site of the kings of Ui Eachach Cobha, at Knockiveagh and their oldest church, at Donaghmore. It is no wonder that the kings and lords of Ui Eachach Cobha decided to set up their headquarters in this parish. Towns as we know them did not exist in Ireland until they were introduced by the Vikings, but the Lisnagade Complex would have been the bustling metropolis of Ui Eachach Cobha. It could have been to Ui Eachach Cobha what Belfast is to us.

While I have tried to be as comprehensive as possible, it is true that, to quote John Lennon, we are only "scratching the surface" of Aghaderg's rich and bloody history.

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