

Early medieval farmsteads

During the early medieval period (circa 500-1100AD), a large proportion of the farming community resided in ringforts. The remains of these are found in large numbers in every county in Ireland and are known by various names, including fort, rath, dún and lios. Many of our townland names are derived from these ancient ringforts.

Ringforts are usually circular, with a diameter of between 20 and 60 metres. They are defined by an earthen bank formed by material thrown up from a fosse or ditch immediately outside the bank. In more stony areas, particularly the West of Ireland, a large stone wall enclosed the farmstead instead of the ditch and bank; these are referred to as cashels or cahers. However, over the centuries the stones from many of these cashels have been taken for reuse in walls, roads and other structures.

A small proportion of ringforts have two or more rings of protective banks and ditches and these are believed to have belonged to the upper grades of society.

The dwelling houses within these protected enclosures were generally circular thatched structures with post and wattle walls and a central hearth sunken into the ground. Other timber buildings within these farmsteads would have been used to house animals or as grain stores. Again, in areas where stone was plentiful, some of the structures would have been built with stone and their remains are sometimes still visible. It is only during archaeological excavation that the remains of the wattle and timber structures are found. Sometimes in permanent pastureland, the ancient field systems associated with ringforts survive.

Ringforts were home to a whole array of activities, including weaving, leather working, corn drying and grinding, animal butchery and iron working. Burials can also be found within ringforts, possibly indicating that the occupants wanted to keep their dead close by.

SOUTERRAINS

A feature sometimes found in ringforts is an underground man-made passage known as a souterrain (also referred to as a cave or tunnel).

They are usually built of stone but can also be tunnelled into rock or compact clay or gravel.

The entrance is normally from the ground via a narrow opening leading to a roofed passage divided into segments by narrow creepways.

Souterrains apparently independent of ringforts are sometimes

This is the latest in a series of articles from the National Monuments Service of the Department of Arts, Heritage and the Gaeltacht to introduce *Farmers Journal* readers to the archaeology of Ireland and to highlight the vital role of the farming community in preserving our heritage.

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CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE:
Inside a souterrain at Benagh, Co Louth;
Reconstruction of a crannóg from The Living Past Heritage Park, Craggaunowen, Co Clare;
A ringfort in state ownership at Carran, Co Tipperary.

found in early Christian ecclesiastical enclosures. They were used as places of refuge during raids and possibly for storage of food as they would have had a constant cool temperature.

Over 45,000 examples of ringforts have been found in Ireland. However, many have been levelled over the last century as a result of land improvements with their remains now only visible from the air or in aerial photographs.

Ringforts excavated in the course of road construction and housing developments in recent years have greatly advanced our knowledge of how people lived during the early medieval period.

CRANNÓGS

Crannógs are small circular man-made islands in lakes or marshland,



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serving the same function as ringforts although some have evidence of occupation as far back as the Bronze Age. Some appear to have been used up to the 17th century.

Crannógs were made up of layers of material such as brushwood, sods and stones with a palisade of closely set wooden stakes around the perimeter to consolidate the structure and act as a defensive barrier. The stumps of these stakes are often visible where they have been preserved by waterlogged conditions.

These conditions also preserve other wooden and leather objects, making such sites very interesting to archaeologists. **CL**

**NEXT WEEK: THE VIKINGS
LEGACY IN IRELAND**