

Following the footprints

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# Following the footprints

Folklore and archaeology combine to tell the tale of a *cillín* at Ardnaglass Lower, Co. Sligo.

ALMOST 1,500 *CILLÍNÍ* (children's burial-grounds) have been registered by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland, with a distinct concentration along the western seaboard: over 75% are located in counties Galway, Kerry, Mayo and Clare. Many other *cillíní* have not yet been formally recorded, sometimes because they have fallen out of memory and sometimes because they are 'concealed' within a pre-existing archaeological monument. An example of the latter is a *cillín* located within an early medieval ringfort in Ardnaglass Lower townland, immediately south of the village of Grange in north County Sligo (Fig. 1). The SMR for the ringfort is SL005-040- ---, but until now the *cillín* was not a recorded element of this archaeological site. The manner in which it came to our attention highlights a valuable tool that archaeologists can use to identify (and thereby protect) further *cillíní* in the landscape.

In the course of researching the folklore of *cillíní*, we came across the following reference in the Schools' Folklore Collection, collected in 1939 from Mr James Feeney (aged c. 68):

'There is an old disused graveyard in the townland of Ardnaglass near Grange, Co. Sligo in a field owned by

Mrs Moffit of Grange. This field is used now for meadow and grazing.

This graveyard was used only as a burial place for unbaptised children about eighty years ago. There is a large fairy fort in this field and it is said that the children's graves are in and around the fort. There was a flax mill in this field and every morning when the workmen went to work in it they used to see the tracks of little feet in the mill. They thought these were made by the children who had been buried in the fort' (NFSC 0155:236-7, [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)).

The 'fairy fort' referred to could be one of five ringforts/cashels in the townland. A second entry in the Schools' Folklore Collection, collected from Mr Pat Feeney (aged 79), clarified which monument contained the *cillín*:

'In a field belonging to Mrs. Moffit of Newton, in the parish of Ahamlish, in the county of Sligo is an old graveyard called Cill Rouderaun. About a quarter of a mile from the village of Grange, on the south side of the road leading from Grange to Ballintrillick, Cill Rouderaun is situated. Around the "reilig" is the remains of an old stone wall. People say that unbaptised children were buried there long ago: but it has not been used as a burial place within the memory of the oldest inhabitant. About 200 yards north of the "reilig" is a holy well called "Tobar Pádrúig"' (NFSC 0155:001, [www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)).

The description and locational information contained in this second account correlate with a monument recorded as a cashel (SL005-040- ---) on the western edge of Ardnaglass Lower townland, though 'ringfort' would be a more appropriate classification, as the banks are earthen (Fig. 2). The early medieval ringfort is one of the most common monuments to have been appropriated by rural communities for



Above: Fig. 1—Ringfort *cillín* at Ardnaglass Lower in the shadow of Benbulbin Mountain, Co. Sligo.

Right: Fig. 2—Archaeological complex at Ardnaglass Lower. Central enclosure and remnants of a possible secondary enclosure indicated in red. Location of *cillín* circled in yellow. Note locations of mill (background), holy well (centre) and Grange River (left).





and boundaries. The Ardnaglass Lower *cillín* is located just 12m from the eastern bank of the Grange River, which forms not only the boundary between the townlands of Ardnaglass Lower and Barnadarg but also the boundary between the Catholic parishes of Ahamlish and Drumcliff. The flax mill mentioned in the folklore account appears to be a building located 200m to the north-west of the ringfort *cillín* in Ardnaglass Lower townland (Fig. 4).

It is clear from the folklore collected in 1939 that the Ardnaglass Lower ringfort was not being used as a *cillín* at that time, with both accounts suggesting its last usage for burial around the 1860s or 1870s. The story of workmen seeing children's footprints on the floor of the flax mill every morning is a poignant image and one that must have made an impression on the local community, thereby serving to keep knowledge of the *cillín* alive. The story also chimes with a common theme in the wider body of *cillín* folklore: that restless spirits wandered these places. Many accounts collected by the Irish Folklore Commission refer to supernatural night-time sightings or events at *cillíní*—the sound of children playing football, lights seen flickering overhead, the sound of babies crying, and people 'going astray' if they walked through a *cillín*. Stories of this nature mirror religious belief that the unbaptised were consigned to wander in limbo for eternity, with no chance of ever reaching heaven.

burial of the unbaptised. A close association with the *sídh* and the supernatural meant that ringforts were largely avoided by farming communities in recent centuries. Parents plausibly viewed ringforts as offering a safe resting-place for unbaptised infants, places that would not be disturbed. Many *cillíní* were also located near holy wells, thereby drawing on the pre-existing sanctity of a place. At Ardnaglass Lower, Tobar Patrick (SL005-039- ---) is located 40m north-north-west of the ringfort *cillín* (Fig. 3). An association with the national saint must have given some comfort to those parents who buried their children in the adjacent ringfort. There is also a strong correlation between the siting of *cillíní*







Left: Fig. 3—Tober Patrick (SL005-039- ---) holy well at Ardnaglass Lower.

Below: Fig. 4—Probable mill at Ardnaglass Lower.

*'Holy wells are a common feature of early monastic sites and are often the sole surviving above-ground element.'*

Opposite page:

Top left: Fig. 5—According to local information, the *cillín* burials were concentrated in an area now dominated by a sycamore tree (circled) outside the south-eastern bank of the main enclosure, which now supports numerous hawthorn trees (left in photo).

Bottom: Fig. 6—Upright slab within the *cillín*, locally believed to mark a grave.

In recent decades, the older generations who farmed the land and lived at Ardnaglass Lower were aware of the existence of the *cillín* but it was not known to the wider community. The *cillín* appears to have been a sensitive subject that was rarely spoken about. In contrast, knowledge of the holy well was widespread; although it is no longer in use, many people in the locality remember visiting it on St Patrick's feast-day but were unaware of the adjacent *cillín*.

A visit to the site at Ardnaglass Lower was organised in May 2020 with the landowner and people from the Grange locality who knew of the *cillín*. They all confirmed the location of the burial-ground as around a mature sycamore tree growing outside the south-eastern bank of the ringfort (Fig. 5) but inside a second earthen and stone bank that surrounds the central enclosure. Several large stone slabs are concentrated at this location, including a distinctive upright slab (Fig. 6) and two recumbent subrectangular slabs that locals remember once stood upright. These slabs are believed to mark the locations of graves. Many smaller stones similar to those typically found at *cillíní* are also concentrated in and around the larger slabs. Disturbance in this area of the site makes it difficult to distinguish what might constitute grave-markers from remnants of collapsed field boundary walls. A denuded drystone wall runs

north-south immediately east of the *cillín*, complicating matters further.

#### RINGFORT OR ECCLESIASTICAL ENCLOSURE?

In the course of researching this site, it became apparent that the primary monument under discussion here may *potentially* be an early medieval ecclesiastical site rather than a ringfort, based on the following observations.

- The site is more complex than might be expected for a ringfort. The remains of two denuded curvilinear earthen and stone banks survive to the south through to the east of the main enclosure (internal diameter 19m), as well as being evident to the north.







Where visible, this bank appears to be oval in plan, with the central enclosure set in the north-west quadrant. The *cillín* is located between the innermost enclosure and this second outer bank. It is possible that these two enclosing elements represent an early medieval monastic vallum (Fig. 2).

- Holy wells are a common feature of early monastic sites and are often the sole surviving above-ground element. The presence of Tober Patrick 40m north-north-west of the enclosure at Ardnaglass Lower is notable in this respect.
- The strategic location of the monument on a parish boundary strengthens the argument for a religious rather than a secular dimension to the site.
- The second folklore account cited above refers to the site as *Cill Roderau*n and *Cill Rouderau*n. The element *cill* typically means 'church'. *Roderau*n (as given in the title of the story) may be a diminutive of a personal name, perhaps Rodán or Ródán, meaning 'little strong one', but the *-er-* after *Rod* is a little problematic. *Rouderau*n (in the main body of the story) may indicate an altered form of the personal name *Ruadhagán*, 'little ruddy/red one'. In the latter, however, one might expect

the medial 'd' to have disappeared during Anglicisation, giving something like *Killruan(e)* (= unattested, postulated form). Could this 1930s name for the site echo the former presence of a church at Ardnaglass Lower? And, if so, who was *Roderau*n/*Rouderau*n?

- Two individuals named 'Roddanus' (Rótán or Ródán) were mentioned by Tireachán as contemporaries of St Patrick, one of whom was associated with the foundation of a church at *Senchell Dumaigi* in the barony of Tirerrill in Sligo. Perhaps more famous is St Ruadhán of Lorrha, Co. Tipperary, who also has Tirerrill connections (Ó Riain 2011, 537, 541–4). Of relevance is that Tirerrill barony adjoins the southern boundary of Carbury barony, in which Ardnaglass Lower townland is located.

#### COMBINING FOLKLORE, LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND ARCHAEOLOGICAL FIELDWORK

The *cillín* at Ardnaglass Lower was brought to archaeological attention by following up on a 1930s folklore account contained in the National Folklore Collection ([www.duchas.ie](http://www.duchas.ie)). This database is a valuable resource for archaeologists. It contains multiple other references to *cillíní* that are not registered as archaeological sites and are not marked on any of the Ordnance Survey maps. Luckily, in this instance the monument was known in the



locality as a *cillín*, which confirmed the earlier folklore accounts. In other cases, however, it is not always possible to identify the location of sites documented in the 1930s. For instance, the National Folklore Collection contains reference to a *cillín* in or near Ballinwillin townland, approximately 3km south-east of Lismore, Co. Waterford. This *cillín* was known as *páirc na gcailíní* ('the field of the girls'), as it was used exclusively for the burial of stillborn and unbaptised girls (NFCS 0635:250). To date, it has not been possible to locate *páirc na gcailíní* on the ground; there seems to be no surviving local knowledge of the site and there are no recorded archaeological monuments of any type within this townland.

Another example of the value of the National Folklore Collection in this respect comes from Monaghan, a county with only two registered *cillíní*. An account from the 1930s recorded that unbaptised children were buried in a field in Mullaghunshinagh, 'and it is said that many people stood on the graves and were unable to leave the field. This field was called *Patsharn*' (NFCS 0932:325). Again, the location of this *cillín* has not yet been identified on the ground. The only recorded archaeological monument in the townland is a ringfort (MO029-018- ---), which might have been repurposed as a *cillín* in recent centuries but that is far from certain. In such instances, the best hope of locating, registering and thus protecting these vulnerable monuments is through a combination of fieldwork, speaking to local communities and following the tracks preserved in the folklore. **AI**

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#### Reference

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