

# LISNAGUN IN CONTEXT: THE RINGFORTS OF THE CLONAKILTY AREA

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## **Introduction**

Lisnagun is a ringfort situated on the lands of Clonakilty Agricultural College, in the townland of Darray (Darrara), 3km east of Clonakilty. Ringforts can be defined as the typical farmsteads of the nobility during the early medieval period in Ireland. Lisnagun is just one of fifty-eight such ringforts in the surrounding area (64km<sup>2</sup> around Clonakilty), of which fifty still survive as visible monuments. There are approximately 4000 examples recorded in Co. Cork alone but about forty per cent have been levelled and, therefore, cannot be accounted for and so what we see today must only represent a fraction of these settlements (Fig. 1). This is particularly significant when we consider that not all early medieval enclosures were constructed and occupied at the same time, and still further, that not every settlement would have been enclosed. Less than one per cent of the ringforts in Co. Cork have been archaeologically investigated in recent times: thirty-four sites between 1972 and 2014. Lisnagun is the only ringfort excavated in the Clonakilty area. As many readers will be aware, Lisnagun was archaeologically excavated between 1987 and 1989 and, subsequently, reconstructed on the same site (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998). It is,

therefore, an ideal case study for describing what these monuments were, how they were used and how they survive today.



Fig. 1: The ringforts in the Clonakilty area, within the wider context of West Cork (Map: author).

## Historical Context

The ringfort is often recognised as the classic settlement-type of early medieval Ireland. This is a period which began around AD 400 and continued until the coming of the Normans in AD 1169. It is partly defined by the coming of

Christianity to Ireland, a time which broadly corresponds with the fall of the Roman Empire across Europe. It is known that the Irish settled in Roman Britain and elsewhere, and that the earliest known Christian missionaries came to Ireland from the Continent. The Irish living in the Roman Empire returned to Ireland with new ideas and technologies. The general result was the introduction of new farming practices and a corresponding surge in population (Comber 2008, 223). Furthermore, the importance of the early Irish Church in the transfer of ideas throughout the period cannot be understated.

Ringforts were the farmsteads of the early medieval period and society at the time was structured around a system of clientship, evidence of which survives in a law tract called *Críth Gablach*, which dates to c. AD 700 (Ó Cróinín 1995, 89). This system of clientship meant that nobles or lords, of various levels, were defined by their ability to grant livestock (or land) to ‘tenants’. It was this noble class that constructed and lived in ringforts. However, not all ringforts are the same size nor shape, and equally, they were not all constructed at the same time nor occupied for the same length of time. These differences certainly highlight the degrees of status of the various occupants and the corresponding numbers of ‘tenants’ that they had. This is seen in the law tracts where in return for the grant of livestock, land or farming equipment, the base client or unfree tenant was expected to, amongst other rents, form part of the lord’s harvesting team (*meitheal*) and work on the ramparts around his dwelling (*ibid.*, 142).

## Enclosures

The defining feature of ringforts is that they are circular areas enclosed by earthen banks. In Irish, they are usually known as *lios* or *ráth*, which denotes this circular embankment.<sup>1</sup> In antiquarian accounts and folklore, these circular enclosures were known as Danish forts and fairy forts, before the now accepted term, ringforts. More information is often found in the additional place-name element. In this case Lisnagun in Irish is *Lios na gCon* meaning Fort of the Hound. Ringforts present interesting toponymic evidence throughout the county, for example Lisavaird (Lissavard) is *Lios an Bháird* meaning Fort of the Bard and Lissaphooa is *Lios an Phúca* meaning Fort of the Ghost.

The surrounding bank of a ringfort was usually created by digging a circular

ditch (i.e. a trench) around the space which was intended for enclosure. The up-cast soil from the digging of the ditch formed the bank. Together, the circular bank and ditch enclosed an area that usually measured around 30m across the interior, but the Clonakilty examples show an average diameter of 36.4m. This shows an average internal area of about 0.1ha (0.25ac). The bank and ditch are often referred to as defences; however, it is unlikely that their main function was defence (Mallory and McNeill 1991, 196-9). The ditch at Lisnagun, when excavated, was found to be 2m in depth and the bank survived to a height of 1.4m, although it was probably once somewhat higher (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 35-7). There was no evidence for a fence on top of the bank, but it is likely that the soil at the top had been eroded away and such evidence for the presence of a fence may have been lost.<sup>2</sup> Nevertheless, the bank and ditch did present a combined height of 3.5m for would-be intruders to scale. It is worth noting that attackers were more likely to be 'large-scale hit-and-run cattle raiders' than organised armies (Monk 1995, 113). The circumference of the bank was 110m, a perimeter that seems too vast to have been defended solely by the inhabitants of a single ringfort (Fig. 2). Similarly, it is not clear if such 'defences' would have prevented wild animals, such as wolves, from gaining access but they must have been of some benefit. It may be that the principal functions of these earthworks were shelter and status, the latter a measure of the number of clients or 'tenants' under the owner of the ringfort. At Lisnagun, there was also a small lower bank on the outside of the ditch. Known as a counterscarp bank, it probably formed when the ditch was emptied out during the lifetime of the site but it also raises the question as to whether the ringfort builders intended to erect a second, outer bank.

Most ringforts have a single bank and ditch; these are known as univallate sites. However, some ringforts have multiple sets of banks and ditches. In the Clonakilty sample area, just three ringforts have more than one bank and ditch. The sites in question each have two banks and are located in the townlands of Caher, 7km to the south-west of Lisnagun, South Ring, 3km south of Lisnagun, and Cahergal, just over 1km west of Lisnagun. This double-banked feature is termed bivallate, while sites with three sets of banks and ditches are called trivallate or multivallate ringforts. To date, only two trivallate ringforts have been excavated in Ireland, both in Co. Cork and both during the 1940s (Ó Ríordáin 1942; Ó Ríordáin and Hartnett 1943). One of these is Ballycatteen

## Lisnagun Ringfort

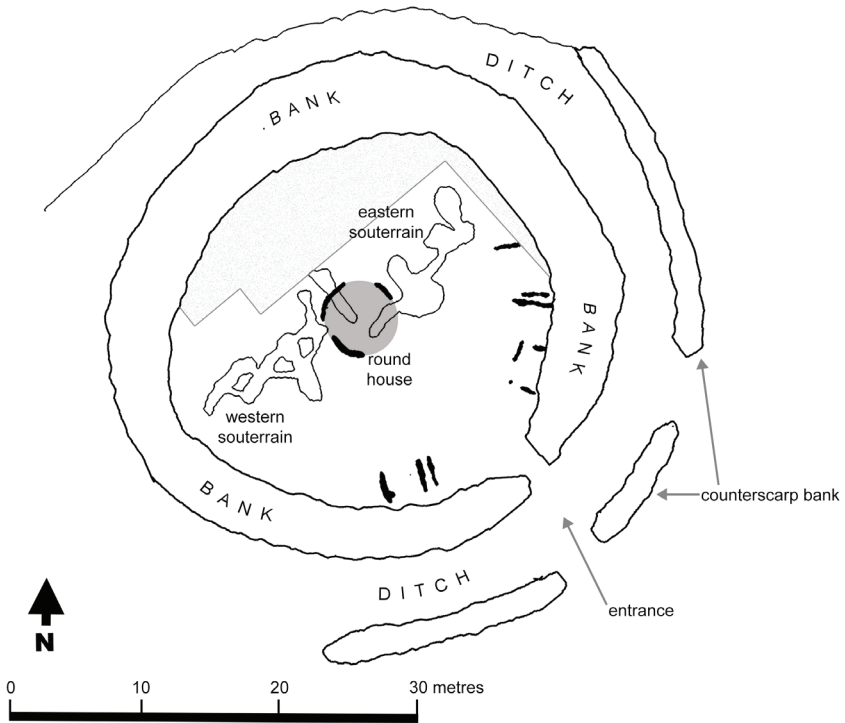


Fig. 2: Simplified plan of the layout of Lisnagun ringfort (Plan: author, after O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, figs 2 and 6).

Fort, near Ballinspittle, 16.5km east of Lisnagun; the other is at Garranes, over 22km to the north-east. In terms of defence, there is no real benefit to having multiple banks and again such features seem to have been a mark of prestige (Power *et al.* 1992, 131). About one in five ringforts have evidence for two or three sets of enclosing earthworks and so they can hardly be deemed very unusual features; these ringforts are considered to be the residences of the higher status nobility in a given area. The internal size of any given ringfort appears to bear no relation to the number of banks. While the average internal diameter in the Clonakilty area is 36.4m, the three bivallate examples are only marginally bigger with diameters of 38m, 40m and c. 44m. On a nationwide

scale, the typical diameter of a ringfort is about 30m (Edwards 1990, 14), and so the ringforts in the Clonakilty area are slightly larger. Where they can be measured, there is a wide variation in the size of the Clonakilty examples from 18m up to 78m in internal diameter; however, eighty per cent are between 26m and 44m in diameter. With a diameter of 37m, Lisnagun falls within this 'typical' size range for the study area.

After excavation, the entrance at Lisnagun was just 2m wide and opened on the south-eastern side (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 37). Here the banks were footed with low, stone revetment walls that continued into the interior of the fort. The ditch did not continue through here, leaving a causeway out through the counterscarp bank. Beneath this, an earlier entrance layout was also found at the same position during the excavation; it featured posts capable of supporting a gateway. This part of the ringfort is protected from the prevailing winds. Only on occasion are entrances identifiable at unexcavated ringforts, but studies have indicated that there was a preference for entrances to be located at the south-eastern or eastern side of the ringfort (Stout 1997, 18).

Inside Lisnagun ringfort, the lowest point was to the east. This meant that surface water would not have drained naturally through the entrance (i.e. in the south-east). As a result, the ground along the eastern side and the south-eastern area towards the entrance would have become poached. During the lifetime of the ringfort, extensive layers of gravel rubble were added to this area (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 45). This may have been related to human/livestock traffic moving to and from the house and outbuildings found within Lisnagun ringfort (see below). Clearer examples of pathways leading from the entrance of the ringfort to the various buildings within it have been found elsewhere, such as Raheennamadra, Co. Limerick (Stenberger 1966) and Garryduff I, Co. Cork (O'Kelly 1963).

## **Buildings**

The interior of the ringfort at Lisnagun was dominated by a central round house. This was found during the excavations but in the words of the excavator 'the evidence here [was] far from satisfactory' (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 58). What was found had been truncated by later ridge and furrow activity,<sup>3</sup> leaving only a circular gully or slot trench. The intermittent line of the wall gave no clues

as to the location of its entrance. Furthermore, there were no large structural post-holes found that might suggest a large roofed structure and, in addition, there was no evidence for a hearth. However, the circular gully defined a space 5.7m in diameter, placed centrally within the ringfort (Fig. 2). It is at least probable that this was a domestic structure. Moreover, it is likely that two souterrains had entrances within this structure (see below).

Of the other forty-nine surviving ringforts in the Clonakilty area, only one, Cahergal, has a possible hut site recorded within it (Fig. 3). It is not surprising that houses and huts are not recorded given the ephemeral condition of the house at Lisnagun. Where the terrain becomes rougher, and where stone is more easily available, hut sites are more easily identifiable within ringforts, as at nearby Dunworly, Burgatia and Freahanes (Power *et al.* 1992, 144, 169 and 171). There has been much debate about the shape of these houses with a general consensus that circular houses were built earlier than rectangular ones, and that round houses tend to be located at the centre of enclosures, while rectilinear houses are often closer to entrances or near the internal perimeter of these enclosed spaces (Lynn 1994; O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010, 21).

The other possible structures at Lisnagun were all positioned along the internal edge of the bank, near the entrance (Fig. 2). While these were also poorly preserved, they seem to indicate lightly-built rectangular structures. The excavator believed these to be small byres or livestock enclosures. O'Sullivan *et al.* (1998, 61) noted an interesting law tract which refers to both these types of structures and dogs:

He who kills a dog of the four doors – namely of the house where his Master dwells, and of the fold of the sheep, and of the byres of the calves and oxen – shall pay ten cows and substitute a dog of the same breed that will do the dead one's service (quoted in Lucas 1989, 24-33, laws 3, 419).

The law is interesting as it mentions the house, sheepfold and byre as being in the same place but also that the dog who protects these places was of some value – which is even more significant at a place called *Lios na gCon* (Fort of the Hound).

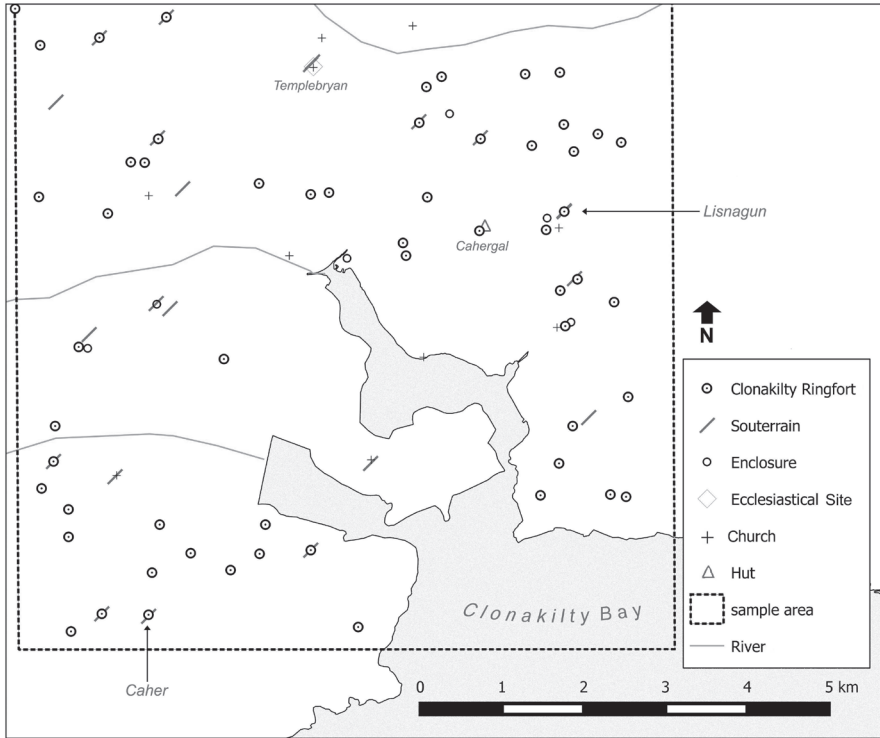


Fig. 3: Clonakilty sample area, depicting ringforts, souterrains, enclosures, ecclesiastical sites and churches.

## Souterrains

The most spectacular aspect of the excavations at Lisnagun was the discovery of three souterrains. These are underground passageways or tunnels that have one or more chambers. They seem to have been used chiefly for storage but also as places of refuge. Elsewhere in Ireland, they were created by digging a trench into which side walls were built of stone and then roofed with stone lintels, before being covered over again with soil. However, in western parts of Cork there was a tendency to tunnel into the soil directly to create these so-called 'earth-cut' souterrains (McCarthy 1983, 100-105). There are over 1000



## Lisnagun Ringfort

such souterrains in Co. Cork and the majority of them are associated with ringforts. In the Clonakilty area there are twenty-three souterrains, thirteen of which occur in ringforts (Fig. 3).



Fig. 4: Eastern souterrain from east during excavation. Photo courtesy of Tim Crowley.

As mentioned above, two of the souterrains at Lisnagun were probably entered from the central round house (Fig. 2). One of the two souterrains extended to the east for a distance of 14m (hereafter the eastern souterrain, see Fig. 4) and had four narrow elongated chambers (Fig. 2). This souterrain contained the remnants of two stone-built air vents (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 39-41). These had been built where the construction shafts led to the surface. This souterrain had either collapsed or been back-filled in antiquity. Its third chamber was reused as a partially stone-lined pit (*ibid.*, 41). The other souterrain entered from the round house extended from the house northwards (Fig. 2). This was not excavated in its entirety because large trees occupy the interior of the ringfort in this area. Nevertheless, it was constructed in a similar fashion to the eastern souterrain and had at least two barrel-vaulted chambers and a drystone-filled construction shaft (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 45).

The third souterrain (the western souterrain) is located to the west of the central house (Fig. 2). While all three souterrains may have been used simultaneously, this western souterrain was probably the latest in terms of dating.<sup>4</sup> Like the eastern souterrain, it also had an entrance at either end. Its passage deviated to the south before continuing west. Three of its four chambers are connected to a central stone-built vent (Fig. 2). Its easternmost chamber had been built with four orthostats supporting stone lintels; a similar method is used in the construction of souterrains in other regions of Ireland. Again, its chambers were connected by narrow passageways or creepways, some only 0.5m wide and 0.5m high but over 2m long. O'Sullivan *et al.* (1998, 62) noted that the floors of this souterrain were smooth and even where they had been rock-cut at its western end, clay had been levelled out to form an even floor; this suggested regular use rather than occasional human traffic.

The accepted date range for souterrain building is between AD 750 and 1250 (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010, 31). This is a time during which Viking raids are well documented but the native Irish were slave traders well before this. The narrow passages of the souterrains are manifestly defensive and, therefore, the souterrain may have been a place of refuge in times of tension. However, in a farming society the need for storage was also a necessity. It would have been beneficial if such storage was cool, dry and not easily raided by others; the souterrain meets all of these requirements. The smooth floors of the Lisnagun

souterrains suggest the latter was the primary function as foodstuffs and other valuables also needed to be protected, and so the souterrains would have been regularly frequented in order to transport goods to and from the chambers.

The distribution of souterrains is also informative regarding their function. Within the Clonakilty study area, thirteen occur at ringfort sites, one within an enclosure, three adjacent to ringforts and three associated with early ecclesiastical enclosures. Two of the remaining three have associations with a church, while one in Kilgarriff townland is only known through local tradition.<sup>5</sup> Isolated souterrains, normally indicative of unenclosed settlement, are therefore absent in the study area. The locations of these souterrains at habitation sites (i.e. ringforts and ecclesiastical sites) strongly suggest a domestic, day-to-day usage, as opposed to a primary function as refuges where locating souterrains some distance away from settlements might have been more effective.

## Economy

Ringforts were farmsteads which existed in a society which was largely self-sufficient. An analysis of animal bones found on early medieval sites shows that cattle, sheep and pigs were the main livestock of the period; the small assemblage of bone recovered at Lisnagun reflects this picture (McCarthy, M. in O'Sullivan 1998, 56-7). Charred plant remains from Lisnagun were also analysed and indicated cultivated cereals: oats were the most dominant crop, followed by barley, with scarce amounts of wheat, rye and flax (Monk in O'Sullivan 1998, 55). An eighth-century law tract, *Bretha Déin Chécht*, ranks cereals in order of their status in society, with bread-wheat and rye ranked as the most prestigious, then barley and finally oats (Kelly 1997, 219). Eighty-five per cent of the charcoal uncovered throughout the site was produced from oak and hazel wood (Lennon in O'Sullivan 1998, 55-6). Notably, both are native tree species and both are recognised as structurally useful wood-types, oak having strength and hazel having flexibility.

Similarly, the artefacts from Lisnagun are domestic in nature. A number of perforated stones, hone stones, small quantities of iron slag and iron blades, hooks and other pieces, all indicate the domestic activities of an average-sized ringfort (O'Sullivan 1998, 62). Only a single blue glass bead<sup>6</sup> demonstrated

any degree of status. The backfilling of the eastern souterrain provided most of the artefacts that were found in context and largely represented domestic implements of stone and iron.

## **Dates**

Although the early medieval period begins around AD 400, the majority of ringforts were not built until about AD 600. Excavation evidence reveals that the main ringfort building phase in Ireland took place over a period of around 300 years, ending in about AD 900 (O'Sullivan *et al.* 2010, 68; Monk 1995, 114; Stout 1997, 24). Of course, frequently the ringforts continued to be occupied after this date.

In the Clonakilty area, Lisnagun is the only ringfort to have been scientifically dated. The excavator selected two samples for radiocarbon dating; however, neither sample ultimately indicated the date of construction of the site. A date centred on AD 940<sup>7</sup> was returned for the backfill of the eastern souterrain, while the other date was from a layer within the western bank and returned a date centred on the twelfth century.<sup>8</sup> The ringfort was almost certainly built prior to both of these dates. The earlier radiocarbon date marks the abandonment of the eastern souterrain. The later date is more problematic; it might be due to uncast soil from the western souterrain (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 49-50). However, these dates do illustrate the longevity of ringfort occupation, in this case at least 200 to 300 years.

## **Distribution**

There are over 45,000 ringforts in Ireland and this means an average of at least 0.55 ringforts per square kilometre (Stout 1997, 53). It is impossible to assess an exact distribution of these sites as many have been destroyed, but even when levelled they can sometimes be recorded.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless, some must be assigned to the broader category of 'enclosure'. The density of sites in the Clonakilty sample area is 0.94 ringforts per square kilometre – nearly twice the national average. This is a reflection of the suitability of the terrain for stock grazing and other forms of agriculture. The distribution of ringforts shows that the preferred position of the sites was on slopes – favouring south-facing slopes – in good, well-drained land.

Generally, high-status sites, i.e. multivallate ringforts, tend *not* to be clustered together but instead are surrounded by univallate sites (Stout 1997, 85-90). This reflects the hierarchical society of the time and is, by and large, the layout seen in the Clonakilty area, where bivallate ringforts are located considerable distances from one another. However, a notable observation is that large univallate ringforts do tend to group together, for instance at Ballintemple where three of the four ringforts with diameters over 50m are sited within 500m of one another. Regardless of size, groups of two or three ringforts occurring in close proximity are a relatively common phenomenon, for example in the townland of Desert.

The defensive aspect of the earthworks has been outlined above. However, the distribution of the sites demonstrates that from each ringfort site, other sites can clearly be seen. This is referred to as 'defence in depth' (*ibid*, 20). These visual territories can include up to seventeen ringforts (as mapped in Co. Antrim by Stout 1997, 20). One theory is that occupants of outlying ringforts could 'fall-back' to a nearby ringfort at the onset of an attack/raid, and perhaps in turn strengthen the defence of the neighbouring ringfort. Intervisibility between sites would have been an important consideration but so too would have been the distance between sites. In the case of Lisnagun, there are ten ringforts within a 1km radius and eighteen within a 2km radius. It is perhaps this 'closeness' that provided the principal defensive feature of these sites.

The distribution of ringforts cannot be viewed in isolation from the distribution of early church foundations. In the Clonakilty area, Templebryan, an early ecclesiastical enclosure, is notable in that the nearest ringforts are all approximately 1.5km away (Fig. 3). Similarly, on Inchydoney Island, where a souterrain exists alongside the remnants of an early ecclesiastical site, there is an absence of ringforts (see Boazman, this volume). However, ecclesiastical sites were supported by secular patrons from the nearby ringforts – the churches were frequently sited on lower ground than the patrons' ringfort (Stout 1997, 128).

## **Reconstructing the Past and Preserving the Future**

Although there are ringforts all across the island of Ireland, Lisnagun is the

only example of a reconstructed ringfort which relies largely on the evidence found at the archaeologically excavated site and which is situated in its original position in the landscape. Elsewhere, ringforts have been replicated from a general understanding of ringforts and often located in places that are convenient to modern access rather than in authentic locations. The reconstruction at Lisnagun included the earthworks, the central round house, the western souterrain and some of the outbuildings – all informed from the archaeological record. O’Sullivan (1990, 24) stated that it was not experimental archaeology nor was it conservation nor even strictly reconstruction but ‘the creation of a reasonable impression in authentic materials of what the site might have looked like during its occupation’.



Fig. 5: Reconstructed round house, August 2012. Photo courtesy of Traolach Ó Donnabháin.

The excavation highlighted the importance of these sites to the many Agricultural College students and to the general public, and even now stands as a reminder of the responsibilities we have to protect ringfort sites. One of the aims of the Lisnagun project was to ensure the continuity of the relatively low ringfort destruction rates of sixteen per cent in the locality and this seems to have been a success. The tourism aspect of the site is as tenuous today as it was almost twenty-five years ago, when O'Sullivan (1990, 25) stated, 'as for the prospects of Lisnagun as a major tourism amenity, well, one may wait and see'. Lisnagun is in many ways an average ringfort, rejuvenated in an extraordinary way to offer a glimpse of what farmsteads may have looked like over a thousand years ago. The Lisnagun project has given us insights into the other ringforts of the Clonakilty area and society generally in the early medieval period.

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## (Endnotes)

- 1 Cahers and cashels are similarly defined by their enclosing circular stone walls (as opposed to the earthen banks of the ringforts).
- 2 Clear evidence of palisade fences has been found elsewhere, e.g. Lisleagh I, Co. Cork (Monk 1995, 107).
- 3 Ridge and furrow refers to parallel 'drills' dug by hand; they were often associated with potato plots in the pre-Famine period
- 4 The excavator noted that the sterile fills of the other souterrains most likely derived from the construction of the western souterrain (O'Sullivan *et al.* 1998, 62).
- 5 This souterrain is 415m east of the church at Kilgarriff.
- 6 Artefact number (E424:67).
- 7 UB-3178; 2 Sigma range 877–1001 AD.
- 8 UB-3177; 2 Sigma range 1010–1260 AD.
- 9 Levelled ringforts can be identified from nineteenth-century maps, crop-marks and geophysical surveys. However, only archaeological excavation can categorise such sites with any certainty