



View of Owenbristry cashel, with turlough visible to left.

Medieval life and death by the ‘broken river’

Finn Delaney, John Lebane and Katie Keefe of Eachtra Archaeological Projects and NRA Archaeologist Jerry O’Sullivan report on the excavation of an early medieval cemetery-settlement at Owenbristry, Co. Galway, on the N18 Oranmore–Gort road scheme.

Owenbristry townland is located in the low-lying plain of south County Galway, about 3 km west of the village of Ardrahan. Soils are shallow and dry here, with frequent exposures of karstic limestone or limestone boulder fields. Grass pasture, within drystone field walls, is the dominant landuse today, though, unusually, there are some good tillage fields in the townland. A cashel, or stone-built ringfort, was erected here in the early medieval period. Its unrecorded, partly upstanding remains were concealed by blackthorn scrub and partly incorporated into later field boundaries, until the site was discovered in 2008 in advance of the N18 Oranmore–Gort road scheme. The most striking feature of the cashel’s setting is that floodwater wells up from an underground aquifer in the winter months, forming a seasonal lake or ‘turlough’ to the east, west and south. Local people say that this turlough is the *abhann briste* (literally ‘broken river’) that gives the townland its name.

The cashel

The cashel is located on the townland boundary between Owenbristry and Killeenhugh. Today the boundary is a well-built stone wall, but it is very likely that the turlough formed the original boundary, so that the site described here would originally have been located not in Owenbristry but in Killeenhugh. Beyond Killeenhugh, at the top of a long, gentle slope and



(Drawing: Eachtra Archaeological Projects)

Plan of the cashel at Owenbristry.

about 1.5 km from the present site, are the remains of a later medieval church and cemetery in the townland of Killeenavarra. The ruins of a substantial medieval house are appended onto the south side of the church and this was a cell of the Augustinian canons of the ancient cathedral church of Kilmacduagh, near the border with County Clare, to the south.

The cashel at Owenbristy was a circular, stone-built enclosure with a diameter of about 40 m. The wall was built with inner and outer faces of large fieldstones, filled with a smaller rubble core. It was best preserved in the south-east quadrant, where it survived to a height of 2.1 m with a basal width of 1.6 m. Elsewhere, however, it was very much reduced and survived as a low, amorphous stony bank or merely as a basal course of large, edge-set stones protruding from the turf. The enclosure occupied more or less the whole surface of a small knoll, which became a promontory within the turlough when the floodwaters rose in winter. There was no surviving, identifiable entrance.

Burials

Within the cashel, a group of burials was restricted to an area within the east quadrant, measuring 20 m north–south by 8 m east–west. The graves were organised in three distinct north–south rows, with two distinct slab-lined burials marking the southern extent of the burials; however, no formal barrier was identified separating the burial ground from the rest of the enclosure.

Drawing: Eadhra Archaeological Projects



Plan of the cemetery at Owenbristy.



Photo: John Sunderland

View of the cemetery at Owenbristy, from north.

The excavation recorded 81 skeletons in 65 graves, although ongoing post-excavation analysis has identified a minimum of 95 individuals to date. Of these, 45 were non-adults and 50 were adults, including both males and females. The skeletons exhibit an unusual amount of evidence for interpersonal violence, with blade wounds on at least eight individuals, and one adult male who was stabbed, slashed or chopped with assorted weapons over 100 times, certainly mutilated and possibly quartered.

The burials were generally extended, supine (face up) and oriented west–east (the head being to the west), though several children's skeletons and two adult skeletons were flexed. One of the flexed children's skeletons was in the only grave that was aligned north–south. The main concentration of sub-adult burials was in the southern end of the burial ground.

There were two distinct grave types: 39 were simple graves-pits; the remaining 26 were slab-lined graves, with or without lintel stones. Some slab-lined graves were cut by simple grave-pits and some grave-pits were cut by slab-lined graves, so that it is not clear which form was earliest. Radiocarbon dates for the skeletons range from the first mid millennium to the modern period but most of the adults are early medieval in date.

Of the 26 slab-lined graves, 19 contained a single articulated skeleton or the disarticulated remains of a single skeleton, while the remaining



Distribution plan of the grave-pits and slab-lined graves in the cemetery at Owenbristy.

seven contained multiple burials. Both children and adults were buried in slab-lined graves. Where children were included within multiple burials they were always interred on top of adults. In three instances slab-lined graves contained only children and two had adults only. One had children only and here the younger of two children was placed on top of the other. A few artefacts were recovered from slab-lined graves, mostly in the form of highly corroded pieces of metal. One grave contained a possible belt buckle and from two others came three bone pins.

Of the 39 grave-pits, 34 contained a single articulated skeleton and in one instance the disarticulated remains of a single skeleton. The remaining simple graves contained multiple burials. Both children and adults were present in the grave-pits and, again, where children were included they were always interred on top of the adults. In 22 instances only children were contained within the graves. Two of these contained two children and, again, in both cases the younger child was placed on top. One of the multiple burials consisted of adults only. Only two artefacts were recovered from the grave-pits. One grave contained a metal pin. In another, the skeleton (a possible adult male) had a metal collar or torc around its neck. This was the only tightly flexed adult inhumation.

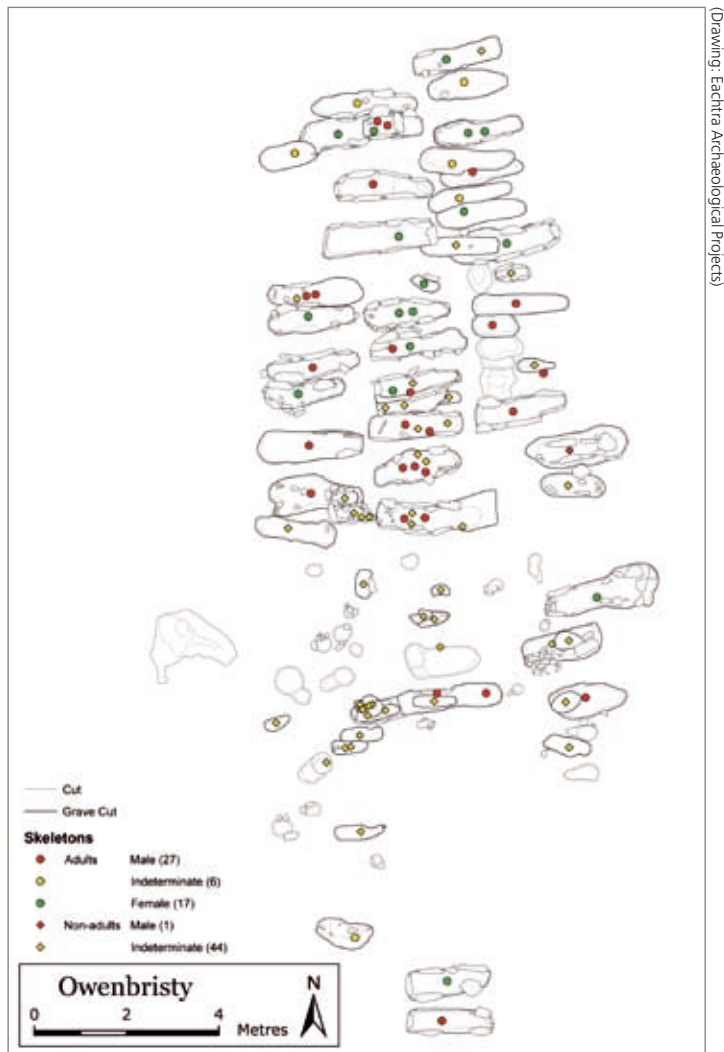
A building in the burial ground?

The most striking feature is the interruption of the cemetery pattern that occurs towards the southern end of the group of burials. This coincides with a cluster of small pits and post-holes. The space is defined at its

south side by an elongated group of intercutting graves. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that these graves respected the south wall of a building and the most obvious interpretation is that this was a small wooden church. However, apart from the burials themselves, the material evidence from this site bears few other hallmarks of an early ecclesiastical settlement. There are no cross-slabs or bullaun stones, for instance, and no evidence for high-status craftwork or literacy. But if this site did once lie in Killeenugh townland and not in Owenbristy, then perhaps this cashel once housed an early medieval church and cemetery dedicated to St Aodh. By extension, perhaps the later medieval church at Killeenavarra, on the hilltop to the north, is simply a migration of this earlier church to a more suitable site, when the church and lands came into Augustinian hands.

Occupation evidence

Apart from the possible building described above, a small number of shallow pits, post-holes and possible hearths were recorded elsewhere within the cashel. The finds from the site formed a typical early medieval assemblage and consisted of several bone and metal pins, a bone-handled iron knife, several other iron knife or blade fragments, several possible whetstones, a plain metal ring (possibly from a horse bridle), two blue glass beads, two fragments of a lignite wristband and several rotary quern fragments. The stone tools recovered are predominantly associated with metalworking activities, which may have taken place at the site. A number of slag residues also point towards on-site metalworking.



Distribution plan of gender and age of burials in the cemetery at Owenbristy.

Conclusion

Reporting and analysis of the results from Owenbristy are ongoing at the time of writing, but it is clear that it is a distinctive site, presenting an interpretive challenge. The enclosure was a drystone cashel that had been partly incorporated into surrounding field boundaries. The burials within it were in ordered rows, which were interrupted by a group of pits, suggesting a possible wooden building aligned east–west—possibly a church. The enclosure itself did not occupy elevated ground, but was in a low-lying and sheltered location where its walls were lapped every winter by the rising waters of the *abhann briste* turlough. It was located on a floodland boundary between two townlands, and within 2 km of a barony boundary to the south. Owenbristy may have been an early church site, ultimately supplanted in the later medieval period by Killeenavarra, on higher ground to the north.

