

Louth Peace & Reconciliation Partnership Shared Heritage & Myths

Field Trip Notes 7/11/09

Landscape & Archaeology: South Co. Louth

On Saturday 7th November, we set out from the Millmount Museum in Drogheda, along the Boyne Valley, on a cool but sunny morning, to examine the **landscape & archaeological heritage** of South Louth. This landscape encompasses geological and glacial heritage, as well as elements of the Stone Age, Bronze Age, Iron Age, early Christian and medieval periods.

We admired the steep river valley sides in the town, the results of large volumes of glacial meltwater at the end of the last Ice Age, c. 13,000 years ago, rushing seawards. It is likely that the glacier exploited an older east-west fault (or crack in the earth's crust) in the Carboniferous limestones, which form the bedrock of the Boyne Valley, seen in passing in the abandoned Premier Periclase Mell Quarries above the town. Northwards, we passed Tullyeskar (*Tulach eisicir*, little hill of gravel ridges), reflecting the sinuous sub-glacial gravel ridge deposits, 'eskers', evident there.



First stop was at Monasterboice (*Mainistir Bhuithe*, St. Buite's Monastery), a 6th century, early Christian monastic site, survived by two late medieval churches, three 9th century High Crosses and a Round Tower. Two of the crosses are decorated with biblical scenes, some of the finest examples of their type in Europe. The monastery was an important centre of learning, with a library in the Round Tower, & would have supported a significant local population. It was sited on a prominent glacial ridge, providing good visibility of the surrounding plains and any impending attack. To the west and south, we saw U-shaped valleys of the Mattock River system, the classic shape of glacially scoured valleys, and deposits of glacial 'till' which forms the good agricultural soils of the locality.

Photos 1, 2: Aude Laffon, project archaeologist, explains the history of Monasterboice



Next stop was at Mellifont Abbey, the first Cistercian Monastery in Ireland, founded by French monks in 1142. It was the mother house of many Cistercian abbeys and had a strong influence on later religious and architectural developments. The abbey is very well protected, lying along a glacially-formed meltwater channel (3) which is now exploited by the Mattock River. The abbey is founded on outcropping sedimentary rocks aged c. 420 million years, well seen underlying the adjacent small chapel. Interesting to note, the tower house and abbey were built of local



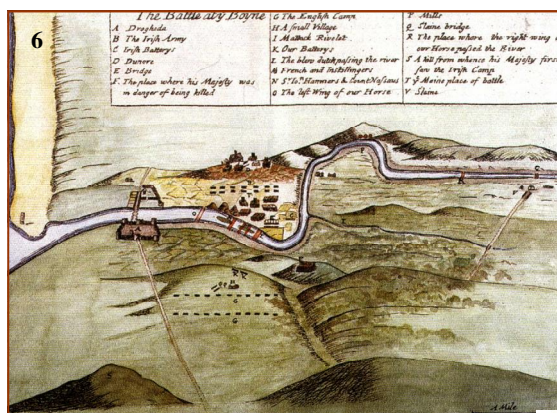
stone, but the modern paving and steps were sourced in Co. Clare—we admired the 'trace fossils' of grazing animals in the Liscannor Flagstones.



Photo 4 shows the remaining floor plan of Mellifont Abbey, but (5) demonstrates the considerable evolution of architectural heritage to be seen at Mellifont, with at least five periods from early Christian to the modern in evidence.

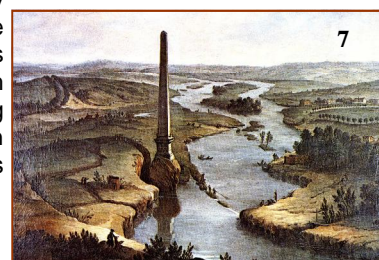


We headed to Tullyallen (*Tulach álainn—beautiful hill*), from where we descended through King William's Glen, an excellent example of a glacial meltwater channel, to the Curly Hole on the River Boyne, an early ford and fishery of the river. This ford marks the southwards crossing point of the Williamite armies in the Battle of the Boyne, and we could demonstrate the military understanding of the landscape



(hills, river, glens), as seen (6) in George Storey's contemporaneous painting (*looking south*) of the battle site. The channel of King William's Glen is clearly seen in the central foreground.

Looking eastwards along the Boyne Valley from Curly Hole (7), we can clearly see the glacial scouring effects and lateral moraines downstream. The Mattock River enters from the left, while the Obelisk, built at the fording point on an outcrop of limestones, was blown up in 1922. Note the lack of trees in Ireland's 18th century landscape.





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The group lunched at the Battle of the Boyne Centre at Oldbridge House (8), the setting of the Battle of the Boyne in 1690. A mural has been painted on a local cottage wall (9) commemorating the fact.



9

We advanced to the 'Bend in the Boyne River' of the famous Dowth-Newgrange-Knowth passage tombs, where we could see that the Bend is actually controlled by geological faults cutting upper Carboniferous sedimentary rocks, while the ancient people built their sites on elevated glacial ridges to ensure good defences.

At Dowth, we saw how 19th century excavations had damaged the mound of the 3000 BC Bronze Age passage tomb, encompassing two passages. The northerly passage, with some very impressive megalithic art, is 12m in length and ends in a cruciform chamber, with an L-shaped chamber leading off the right-hand recess. The second passage is much plainer, ending in a sub-circular chamber. However, this passage is aligned with the winter solstice sunset. The entrance to the main tomb is evident (10), with cup marks on the entry stone (11). On the east flank, the original kerb stones can be seen, with mysterious (possibly sundials) inscribed (12).

The Mattock Valley to the north forms a U-shaped glacial valley, while the river to the south flows along the glacially exploited faults, with Donore Hill to the south. The stones used to build the tomb were mainly locally derived, but some may have been transported by glaciers to the vicinity, and subsequently used for building by the prehistoric people.



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From Dowth, we by-passed Knowth and headed northwards to Collon. We observed that in the (Iron Age?) saga of the *Táin Bó Chuailnge*, the defining myth of Co. Louth, Queen Maeve's armies stayed north of the Boyne and apparently did not drop in for tea to Newgrange! Much of the story action hinges on crossing river fords, given that chariots and horses had to be moved. The Connacht armies would have crossed the Mattock River near Mellifont, before heading northeast across Co. Louth towards the sea near Annagassan.



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At Mount Oriel, we visited a Bronze Age barrow cemetery on the hilltop (13), where a more recent concrete triangulation point, wind farm and mast have been erected.



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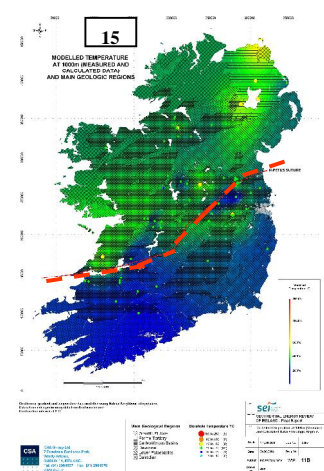
We then drove eastwards, along the 'Grangegeeth Block' a series of volcanic-sedimentary rocks, formed about 460 million years ago at -15° south of the equator. The equivalent-aged volcanic rocks in Balbriggan, just to the south in Co. Dublin, formed at about -50° South, thus signalling the intervening zone that was once the Iapetus Ocean. The Grangegeeth rocks underlie a glacial ridge, where eskers can be seen, marking more recent ice activity c. 13,000 years ago. Placenames frequently reflect these features in the landscape: e.g. Rathescar, *rath eisicir*.

We then set off in search of the route of the Connacht armies in the *Táin*, via Dunleer to Annagassan (*Áth na gCasán*), where Queen Maeve's armies crossed the modern River Dee (*An Níth*) and River Glyde (*An Casán*) with great difficulties and loss of warriors, due to the antics of Cúchulainn in defense of Ulster (*Uladh*). Northwards lay the prize bull of Cooley....and the Connacht army persisted.



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From there we headed to Port, where we stood on a raised beach, evidence of rising sea levels following the melting of ice at the end of the last glaciation. When all the ice had finally melted, isostatic readjustment meant that the earth rebounded when the weight of more than 1km of ice was lifted, thus sea level retreated again, but stabilised c. 5,000 years ago to the modern sea level. Global warming will likely mean that these levels will rise again.



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We ended our day at Clogher Head, the classic geological site marking the final closure of the Iapetus Ocean. We reflected on the geological history of this island, where 420 million years ago, the northwestern (attached to a continent called Laurentia) and southwestern (attached to a continent called Avalonia) parts of Ireland collided. The collision zone runs from the Shannon Estuary through the Irish Midlands to Clogher Head and onwards through Britain and Scandinavia—this is known as the Iapetus Suture (15). Huge mountains somewhat like the modern Alps would have resulted from this collision, but have been eroded and worn down over millions of years. This feature can be mapped geologically, with different fossils and patterns in the rocks on either side of the Suture. Subsequently, Ireland drifted farther north towards the Equator, so that by 350-320 million years ago, we were in the tropics, evidenced by the limestones seen in the Boyne Valley, which formed in a warm sea with corals and other warm water creatures in evidence.