

Early Christian Homes 500 - 1200 AD



Raths or Ring Forts

Settlement sites from this period are numerous and include raths, cashels, crannogs, promontory forts, open settlements and souterrains.



Raths were enclosed farmsteads. They have given their names to many townlands, for example Machaire Ratha, now **Maghera** which translates as 'plain of the fort'. In the countryside they are universally known as forts. A typical rath would have a circular open space some 35 metres in diameter surrounded by a bank, perhaps 4 metres wide and 2 metres high with an enclosing ditch crossed by a causeway to an entrance gap. The interior features may include a souterrain and slightly raised irregular

platforms. Excavations have often uncovered a farmstead with a house of wattles, planks, stone, mud or sods and sometimes with outbuildings.

Finds from excavated sites indicate a settled, mixed agricultural economy: animal bones, querns for grinding grain, coarse hand made pottery, spindle whorls, iron knives and axes and personal ornaments including beads, pins and armlets, but hardly any weapons.

Good examples: Rough Fort near Moira and also Lisnagade and Lisnavaragh in Co.Down, Rathmore in Co.Antrim, Legar Hill Fort in Co.Armagh, Golan in Co.Fermanagh, Sixmilecross in Co.Tyrone.

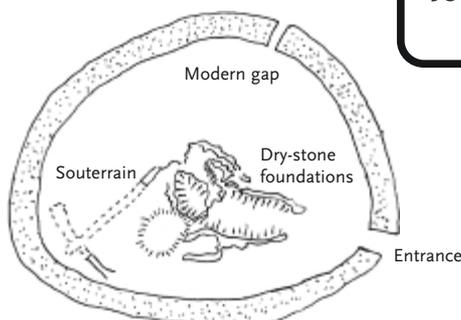
Cashels

This enclosure is broadly similar to a rath in date and function, but is entirely stone built (cashel means stone), and rarely has a ditch. Cashels tend to occur in rocky upland areas where stone is plentiful and ditch building is difficult. The surrounding wall, circular or oval in shape, is of dry rubble and is approximately 2-3 metres thick and about 2 metres high.

The outer and inner faces are very carefully built often with larger stones in the lower courses, but the wall core is of dumped rubble. Excavated cashels tend to produce the same features and finds as raths, though stone was the favoured material for houses and other internal structures.



Above, Drumena Cashel



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A good example is **Drumena near Castlewellan in Co.Down**, excavated in the 1920s. A small T-shaped souterrain and some rather jumbled house formations can be found within the boundary. A number of good examples can be found in **Co.Down**. **Drumaroad White Fort** was excavated in the 1960s and produced the foundation of a squarish stone and mud house. At **Nendrum** there is a cashel of unusual size in an ecclesiastical context. It is sited on a glacial island and is enclosed by three concentric stone walls. **Further examples are: Altadore near Cushendun in Co.Antrim, Killykeegan in Co.Fermanagh, White Fort Cashel in Co.Londonderry.**

Crannogs

The third distinctive type of settlement is known as a crannog - an artificially constructed island of brushwood timbers, stakes, stones and rubbish supporting a platform of wood or stone on which structures of wood or stone were built. They are usually found in areas of extensive lakeland, but they tend to occupy small lakes rather than large stretches of water. There is substantial evidence suggesting that several crannogs witnessed long periods of use, some lasting as long as five centuries.

Building a crannog was a dangerous and laborious task. A team of workmen, working from dug out boats or rafts, would have laid a foundation of planks on the lakebed, anchoring them with vertical wooden piling. The crannog was then built up by depositing successive layers of peat, heather, brushwood and stone. The sides of the crannog would have been retained by a wooden palisade driven into the lakebed around the site.

Examples occur throughout Northern Ireland, but the main concentration is around a belt stretching from **Fermanagh** through **South Tyrone** and **Armagh** to **mid-Down**. Occasionally several crannogs occur together as in **Lough Eyes in Co.Fermanagh**. Many crannogs can now be seen as small tree covered islands in lakes. A prominent example exists in **Loughbrickland in Co.Down** and others can be seen in **Roughan Lough in Co.Tyrone, Castle Lough at Stewartstown, beside Monea Castle in Fermanagh at Lisleitrim in Co.Armagh** and in the lake at **Augher in Co.Tyrone**.



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Above, Crannog construction
Left, Crannog reconstruction

