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'OWEYNAGAT', RATHCROGHAN, CO. ROSCOMMON AND ASSOCIATED KARST FEATURES.

by Joe Fenwick and Matthew Parkes

Introduction

'Oweynagat' (the cave of the cats) is the only cave in county Roscommon noted by Coleman (1965) and although of no great length or especial karstic interest, it is of considerable archaeological and ancient legendary significance.

This site is an integral and important part of a concentration of unusual archaeological monuments focused around Rathcroghan mound located about 5km north-west of the village of Tulsk. Here, over 50 individual monuments and sites are situated within an area of just 10 square kilometres at the eastern extremity of a broad elevated plateau in the region known as *Mag nAí* (the plain of the sheep) in early texts (Waddell 1983; Herity 1983). Rathcroghan, ancient Cruachain, is renowned in history, pseudo-history and legend as the seat of the pre-Christian kings of Connaught. It was from here, for instance, that the story of the great cattle raid of Cooley, the *Táin Bó Cuailgne*, begins with a bed-time dispute between Queen Medb and Ailill (O'Rahilly 1967, 137; Kinsella 1990). Ancient Cruachain is said to have served as royal residence and burial ground and was also the setting for a great festive assembly or *óenach* (Byrne and Dillon 1937, 3; Petrie 1845, 102; Byrne 1973, 90).

Over the past three years (1995-1997) the ArchaeoGeophysical Imaging Project has conducted a major programme of archaeological research, through non-invasive geophysical means, at a number of important archaeological monuments in the Rathcroghan and Carnfree areas of Co. Roscommon (Waddell and Barton 1995; Fenwick, Brennan and Delaney 1996). This project, funded by the Heritage Council, in an interdisciplinary initiative undertaken by the Department of Archaeology and the Applied Geophysics Unit, University College, Galway. With the benefit of significant new information coming to light as a result of this renewed intensive survey we avail of this opportunity to report on the cave site in a little more detail.

Location

The cave is located in the townland of Glenballythomas (179580 E, 283110 N - 131m OD) about 800m south-west of Rathcroghan mound to the south of the main Dublin to Castlebar road (Fig. 1). Approaching from Tulsk turn left at Rathcroghan cross-roads (c.500m after Rathcroghan mound) towards Castlerea. Continue along this road for about 1km, past Rathbeg (on the left) and Rathnadarve (on the right), and take to first turn left onto a narrow lane. Near the end of the lane, on the right-hand side (south), lies a small single storey cottage. A wooden stile permits easy access into the adjacent field within which is situated the cave. The narrow

entrance is set in a hollow directly under the field boundary bordering the lane (Fig. 1).

'Oweynagat' in Myth and Legend

The 'cave of Cruachain' or 'Oweynagat' was considered in ancient myth and legend as an entrance to the otherworld. It was regarded a malevolent hell-like place full of terrifying mythical creatures and supernatural beings (Waddell 1983, 22). In the metrical *Dindsenchas* the cave is described as the residence of the Morrigan, a pre-Christian goddess of war (Gwynn 1924, 201). Other early texts associate it with sinister and savage pigs, birds, cats and female werewolves. It is a place to be feared, particularly on the eve of Samhain (1st November - Halloween), when the hosts of 'hell' are said to emerge from the cave.

Description of the Cave and Souterrain complex

Today the artificial cave or 'souterrain' allowing access to a natural limestone rift cave in the townland of

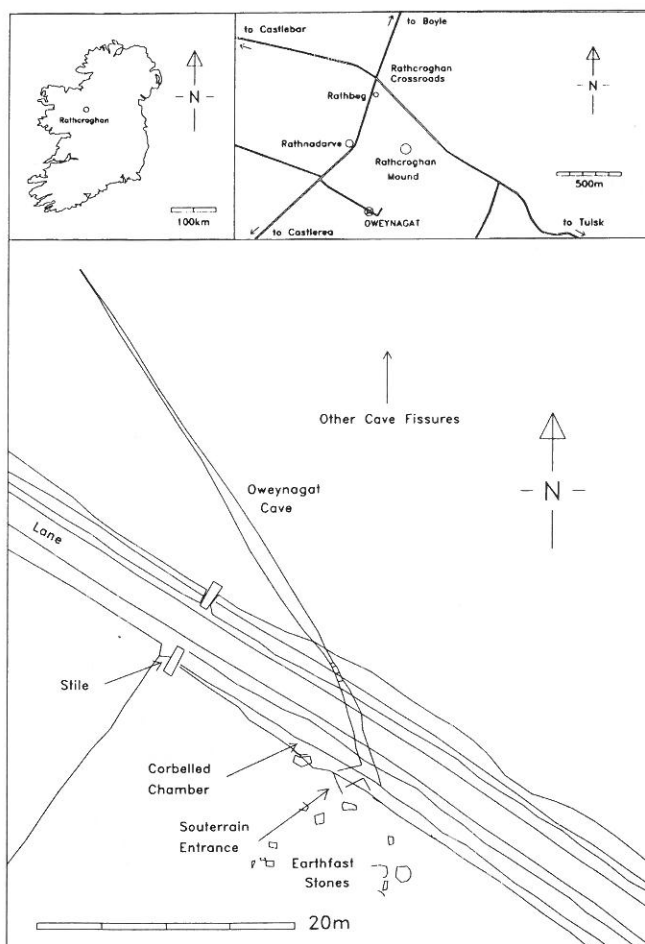


Figure 1. Location map of Rathcroghan and cave.



Figure 2. Joe Fenwick at the entrance to Oweynagat

Glenballythomas is traditionally considered to be the 'Oweynagat' of legend. The souterrain incorporates two ogham inscriptions, the earliest form of writing in Ireland, which is generally regarded as dating from around the 4th to possibly as late as the 8th centuries AD (Edwards 1996, 102-4; Ferguson 1864). These inscriptions, perhaps originally carved on upright pillar stones, were later reused as capstones in the construction of the souterrain at a time their original function and significance became redundant. Souterrains appear to have served as places of storage and temporary refuge and were constructed largely during the Early Historic period (Ó Ríordáin 1979, 65-73)

Despite its considerable importance in the psyche of past generations its ruinous archaeological remains of scattered stones and collapsed souterrain inspire little awe today (Fig. 2). Since Samuel Ferguson's visit to the site in 1864 the surface features of this monument have suffered considerable damage. His schematic illustration clearly depicts the cave entrance set within a circular earthwork (Fig. 3) (Waddell 1983, 26). Today a lane, built during the earlier part of this century, crosses the monument and is largely responsible for erasing most of what was visible in Ferguson's time. Fortunately, the souterrain and cave appear to have changed little since Gabriel Beranger's tour of the area in the late 18th century (Waddell 1983, 24).

An extensive programme of geophysical and topographical survey was undertaken by the ArchaeoGeophysical Imaging Project to identify possible sub-surface indications of the enclosing earthwork, the extent of the natural cave and explore the possibility of an extended system of souterrains

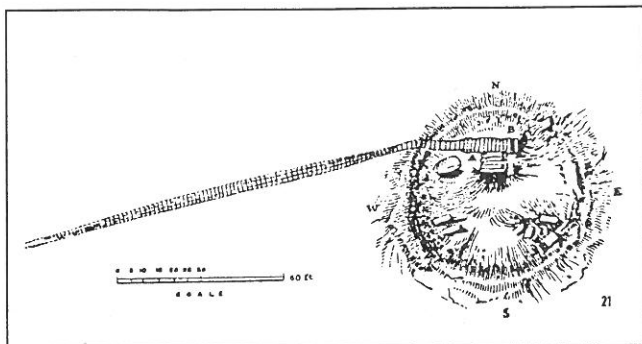


Figure 3. Ferguson's illustration of the cave and earthwork

in the vicinity of the present remains (Fenwick, Brennan and Barton 1996, 24-31).

During the course of this survey a number of interesting features were noted. The souterrain complex is potentially more extensive and complex than originally envisaged. Today a broad low gap beneath a broad limestone lintel permits access to a short 3.0m stretch of souterrain passage c.1.35m wide and averaging 0.85m high. It is possible, however, that the present access to the souterrain is not the original entrance but a point at which the souterrain collapsed and capstones have been removed. The second capstones of this short passage bears an ogham inscription along two or its edges which has been translated to read '[the pillar stone or grave] of Fraich, son of Medb' (Rhys 1898, 230) (Fig. 4). This 'short' souterrain joins at right angles to a second partially artificial passage (c.1.1m wide and between 0.7m and 1.2m high) which exploits a natural narrow fissure in the limestone bedrock.



Figure 4. Sketch of ogham stone in Oweynagat by Ferguson

The extent of this 'main' passage to the south-east (the right-hand-side on entering) is unknown as it remains blocked with collapse debris. The last capstone visible in this section of the passage is also inscribed with ogham which unfortunately remains largely obscured behind the souterrain wall. The position of large stones in the field south of the lane, some of which remain apparently undisturbed and set in their original position, suggest this souterrain may have continued for some distance to the south-east (Fig. 1). It is equally probable that this part of the souterrain could have led to the original entrance.

The 'main' passage continues to the north-west (the left-hand-side on entering) and descends to join to a long narrow natural cave. The passage is largely of artificial construction for about the first 10.0m. This joins to a natural cave which continues for a further 37.0m. The natural fissure appears to have been widened in places and dry-stone walling, supporting large slabs which span the roof of the passage, is built on a footing of natural bedrock on either side. The partially artificial section of passage extends in height and widens considerably before joining to the cave proper. At this point the lintelled ceiling steps down as a vertical wall to accommodate the sudden change in floor level. This feature coincides with a level plinth of natural bedrock on either side of a constricted passage (0.4m wide) which descends, in a series of at least five rough flagstone steps, to the natural

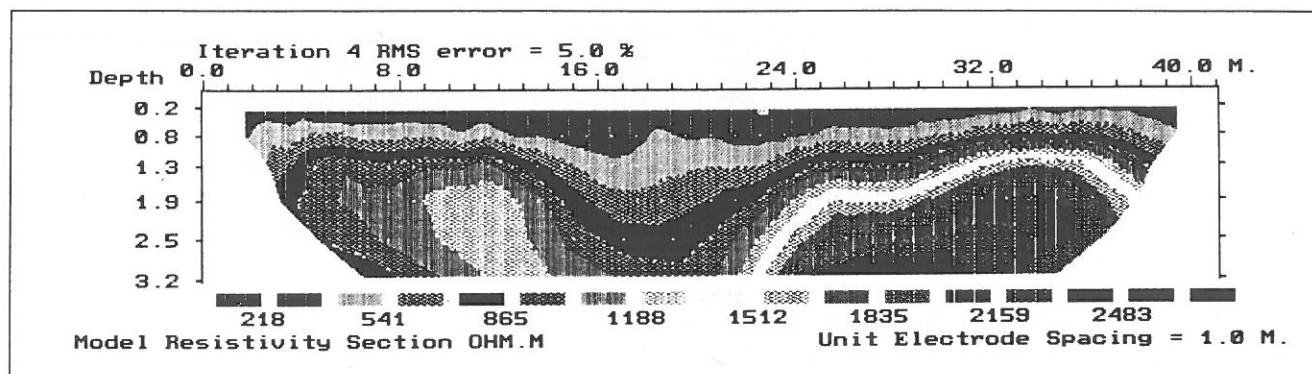


Figure 5. Electrical resistivity pseudo-section taken north of the caves supposed end, showing low resistivity anomaly

the natural unmodified cave below. There may originally have been a wooden 'trap-door' at this point marking the junction between souterrain and natural cave. This door could lie horizontally on the plinth when closed or rest against the vertical walling when open.

The natural cave broadens to an elongated 'chamber', 2.85m in maximum width at its lowest level, which is only 8.0m below present ground level. Its walls taper inwards from the base to a narrow fissure spanned by naturally deposited rocks and boulders forming a 'roof' to the cave several metres above. The floor of the cave is boulder strewn and muddy and evidence of a 'paved' surface is not apparent. The cave ascends and narrows again from this central 'chamber' area to terminate relatively close to ground level, about 50.0m distant from the present entrance. There are also some indications that the cave roof was spanned by stone lintels at the far end of the fissure not far from its end.

In addition to the souterrains discussed above, traces of a third are visible 3.0m to the north-west of the entrance to 'Oweynagat' again exposed at the base of the bank marking the boundary between the road and field to its south (Fig. 1). It is possible to peer through a small gap below a stone lintel which serves as a roofing stone to a rubble-filled corbelled chamber. The top of a possible passage capstone lies exposed immediately south of the corbelled chamber and the positions of a number of other large stones, some which appear to have remained in-situ, suggest the possibility of still more passages and chambers in the immediate vicinity.

An intensive high-resolution survey of the surface topography was undertaken to map very subtle changes in the ground level in an attempt to identify traces of the putative 'enclosure'. There is no clear evidence of a topographical feature of archaeological consequence in the field south of the modern lane. Unfortunately, in addition to road construction this field has suffered extensive poaching through cattle traffic in recent years. A contoured map of the opposite field north of the lane, however, reveals a semicircular platform of roughly 18.0m in diameter which may possibly be the remains of this circular earthwork.

Magnetic susceptibility and gradiometry area surveys in the fields to the north and south of the lane exhibited disturbed and 'noisy' patterns and no clearly recognisable features of archaeological potential were identified (Fenwick, Brennan and Barton 1996, 25, 28-9).

An electrical resistivity Wenner-array pseudo-section taken to the north of the cave's supposed end (Line 5), however, reveals a central low resistivity anomaly (Fig. 5). This is likely to correspond to a continuation of the 'cave' fissure as a clay filled cavity of relatively low electrical resistance contrasting with bedrock of high electrical resistance on either side forming its walls. The combined evidence of all the survey techniques both topographical and geophysical will, when fully processed, enable a more comprehensive interpretation to be attempted in the future.

Associated caves and karst

In the opposite field to the north of the Oweynagat is a modern dry stone wall enclosing two more obvious exposed natural fissures. Though of no great extent these features add to our knowledge of cave development in the area. The fissures are sub-parallel to each other and both consist of a simple linear rift similar to that of Oweynagat. The western example is largely unroofed but its northern end extends as a subterranean feature for an additional 15m (Fig. 6). The northern end of the second, slightly wider, eastern rift also terminates in a cave narrowing to a short inaccessible fissure. Despite the presence of a 'fogra' (mistakenly placed at the wrong cave!) the features within this modern walled enclosure are entirely natural and appear not to have been augmented or modified by later human activity.

The internal profile and lack of scalloping of the Oweynagat passage the other natural fissures to its north suggest the caves formed by solution in static or slow moving water. It is likely therefore that these caves are simple expanded joint fissures and, though there may be numerous other examples beneath the thin overburden of soil and drift, it is unlikely that there is an extensive exhumed maze cave system in the area. Supporting this hypothesis is the presence of a number of subtle linear depressions in the vicinity either continuous or parallel with the line of the caves.

Although the clean oolitic Carboniferous limestone is generally well drained, as one would expect, there are several places the Rathcroghan area where surface streams or standing water exist. These are perched on a discontinuous thin veneer of glacial drift which effectively masks the jointing pattern of the sub-surface limestone bedrock of the area (Delaney 1996). There are, however, a number of curious features in the Rathcroghan area which may reflect the structure and nature of the underlying geology.

Numerous, perhaps hundreds, of shallow rectangular or sub-rectangular pits or depressions are scattered, sometimes in an apparently regular mutually aligned pattern, throughout the surrounding landscape. These pits vary considerably in length but average roughly 2m to 3m in width and 0.5m in depth. In most instances they appear as relatively featureless grass covered depressions (Fig. 7).

It is possible that these depressions are associated in some way with the unique cultural landscape of the area and may actually constitute archaeological monuments in their own right. It appears more plausible, however, that they are simply a reflection of the underlying karstic landscape of linear rifts, similar to Oweynagat, into which the overlying glacial drift and sediments simply settled or collapsed. Drew (1987), reporting on the karst hydrology around the Cong canal, Co. Galway, notes numerous rectangular joint fissures of similar areal proportions to the Rathcroghan depressions. In this instance they are mostly deep, open or water filled. One can imagine, however, if these joint fissures were filled and covered by a thin veneer of sediment they might resemble the unusual features at Rathcroghan.

The depressions display some variation over the whole area but, in general, within a scale of one or two fields, they display a mutually consistent orientation and in some instances occur roughly at right angles to each other. On this observation a relationship to joints in the limestone seems the most likely explanation. Further field investigation may support this argument, but few limestone exposures or quarries are sufficiently large to measure joint orientation and dip to any satisfactory degree of accuracy. Ultimately, scientific archaeological excavation may be the only way to confirm or refute this hypothesis.

A cautionary warning

The prospect of a landscape of unexplored caves may seem tempting to the intrepid speleologist but it should be noted that the Rathcroghan area is an archaeological landscape and as such is protected by law. Although used to confined spaces and long stretches, imprisonment or hefty fines are to be avoided! Excavation of any sort in this area can only be undertaken with the appropriate licence under archaeological supervision.

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