

An Early Medieval Strap-tag from Balally, county Dublin

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Evidence for early medieval activity indicated by a strap-tag associated with a pit was uncovered during the excavation of part of the interior of a large oval banked enclosure with the foundations of a church at its centre.

THE SITE

Referred to by Ball and Hamilton (1895) as the Cross Church of Moreen the site is located between the villages of Dundrum and Sandyford, county Dublin (OS Six-inch Sheet 22, east 77.7cm, north 10cm; NGR O 17942607). It is situated on relatively flat ground between the 91 and 122m contours. As an area 25m south of the site is to be disturbed by the construction of a portion of the proposed Southern Cross Motorway, Dublin County Council requested that the area of the motorway adjacent to the church site be investigated archaeologically. Only those areas affected by motorway construction were available for excavation. This investigation was carried out in the week of 24–28 September 1990.

HISTORY OF THE SITE

The church survives today as the foundation walls only of a rectangular structure, oriented east-west and situated in the centre of a slight mound with a number of large trees and tree-stumps within its walls (Fig. 46b). It measures 12.4 by 7.2m externally and is constructed of undressed granite held together with mortar. It has been noted previously by Ball and Hamilton (1895), Ball (1898, 1900, 1903), Healy (1975), and Turner (1983) and is marked on the OS Six-inch 1837 and 1937-38 editions as "Church". Examination of aerial photographs produced for the Fairey Survey of Ireland in 1971 (BKS 21776139/40 roll 89:10 & 11; OPW Sites and Monuments Record No. 22:036, Fig. 46a) reveals that the church was surrounded by a substantial oval earthen bank measuring 148m in diameter which enclosed the site. This appears to have been enclosed by a second exterior bank, which partially survived on the southern edge of the site. Shortly after this photograph was taken the landscape was considerably altered by the construction of a building for the National Mint and the consequent removal of a number of trees, and the re-routing of a drainage channel to avoid the new building. Most significantly, the entire area to the south of the church appears to have been levelled, removing all indications of the banks. However a portion can still be seen to the west of the church as a low, almost imperceptible linear rise in the ground. (To the east of this, running north-south through the photograph, is the cropmark of an extensive straight ditch which runs for a number of miles in either direction.) This enclosure is comparable to those at other early medieval church sites in the Dublin area (O'Brien 1988). Ball and Hamilton (1895) recorded that the church was built on the site of an ancient battlefield as a symbol of reconciliation between two

85 Belgard Heights,
Tallaght,
Co. Dublin.

29-30 Duke Street,
Athy,
Co. Kildare.

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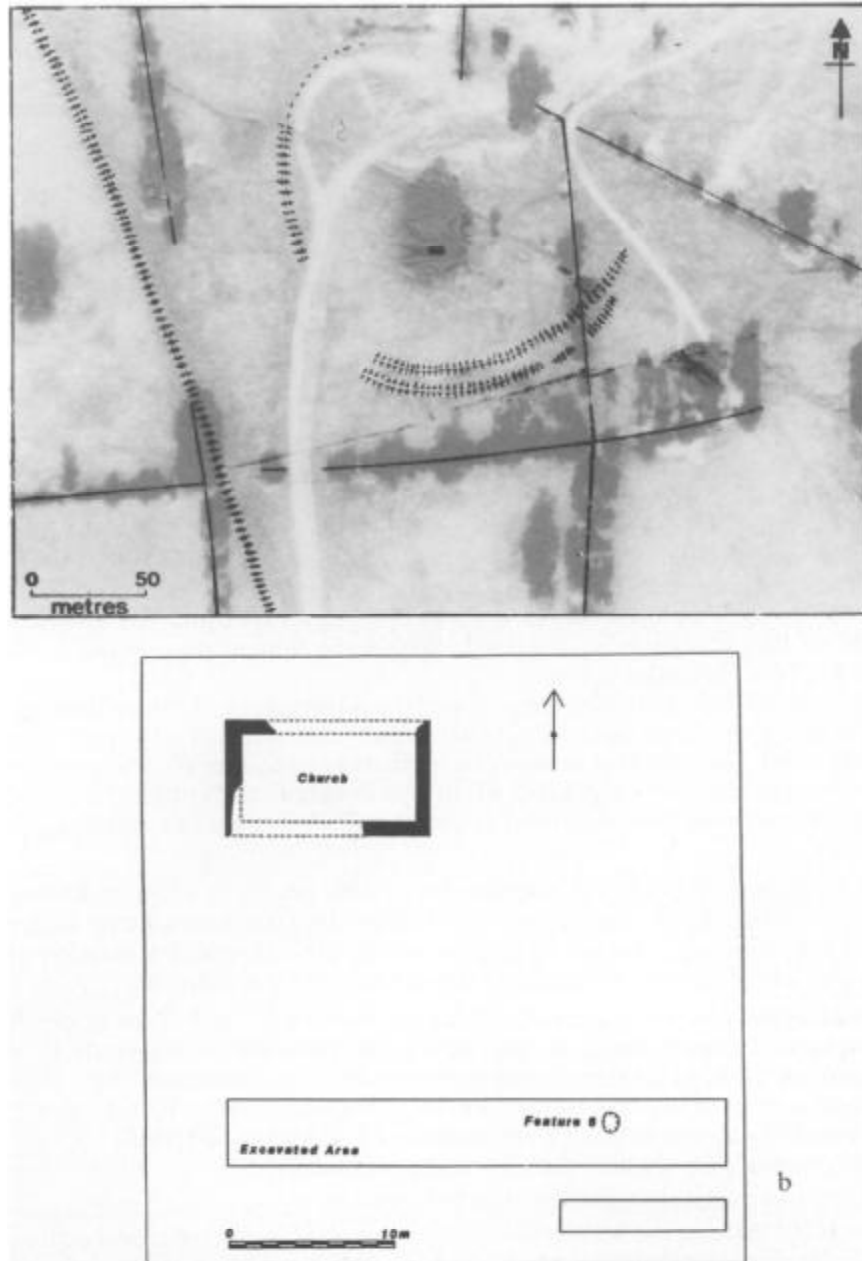


Fig. 46 a Interpretative plan of church and enclosure at Balally, drawn from aerial photograph; the solid rectangle at centre is the church (scale approximate)
 b Ground plan of church at Balally, county Dublin in relation to Feature 6

warring clans, but as Ball (1898, 41) later noted, this was an eighteenth-century tradition. This may indicate the presence of a disused burial ground near the church. The site is not mentioned in the *Ordnance Survey Letters* (O'Donovan 1837) nor in the *Ordnance Survey Name Books* for county Dublin.

Examination of the *Calendar of Documents Relating to Ireland* reveals a number of mentions of the townland, the earliest a reference to the grant of *Ballawley* to John de Walhope by King Edward I in December 1279 (Sweetman 1877, 323). In 1297 a Plea Roll recorded a legal action between John le Botiller and the Abbot of Wetheney, Abbington, county Limerick "as to the right of presentation to the church of Balihawly" (see Ball's notes for his *History of Dublin*, Manuscript in the Royal Society of Antiquaries, Dublin). The find of metalwork noted below with its early Christian decoration places the use of the site even earlier and may indicate that the church itself is pre-Norman. The Civil Survey of 1654-56 (Simington 1946, 260-61) records that on 3 November 1655 the townland contained "One castle thatcht with several houses of office, & the walls of a chapel valued by the Jury at Twenty Poundes", indicating that the church had fallen into disuse by the mid-seventeenth century.

EXCAVATION

An area 118 by 42m was investigated, limited to the area of the road on the northern and southern sides. A mechanical excavator was used to remove the topsoil from thirty-three cuttings, twenty-nine within the area noted above and two more to investigate possible features 90m to the west. The former cuttings covered an area of 740.8 square metres, or 14.94% of the area to be investigated. Within the limited time available this was considered to be an adequate sample.

Nine features were noted during the course of the investigation. Three of these (F 1, 6 & 7) were pits containing large quantities of charcoal and in one case (F 6) bronze metalwork and animal bone. The other six features were ditches containing relatively modern fills or features ranging from a box-drain (F 8), to granite rubble (F 2) or modern debris, i.e. tree branches, concrete posts and insulated cables (F 4). F 5 and 9 contained primarily soil fills.

Feature 1 (Cutting 1) was a small, shallow sub-circular pit, 70 by 62cm in diameter and 10.2cm in remaining depth, cut through the boulder clay. It contained a fill of dark rich soil mixed with charcoal. The soil in the base of the pit had turned a very fine reddish colour apparently as a result of coming in contact with the hot charcoal.

Feature 6 (Cutting 13) was a pit 1.06 by 1.18m in diameter and 34cm in depth. The sides were nearly straight-sided. It was cut through the dark brown sandy B horizon and contained a fill of grey/brown sandy humus above a brown sandy clay. The upper part of the fill contained two fragments of a bronze strap-tag or belt buckle (Fig. 47) (NMI E 574:1) situated on their sides, a large quantity of animal bone (NMI E 574:6) and a quantity of charcoal. The base of the pit was free of finds.

Feature 7 (Cutting 21) was a shallow oval pit 61 by 70cm in diameter and 20cm in maximum depth. It was cut through the white/yellow hard compact clay and contained a fill of earth mixed with charcoal. Beneath this was a layer of reddish soil and under this the soil was yellowish in colour.

Feature 9 (Cutting 11) was a shallow curving ditch 90cm in diameter cut through the yellow/red compact boulder clay. The fill was a grey-coloured material which contained

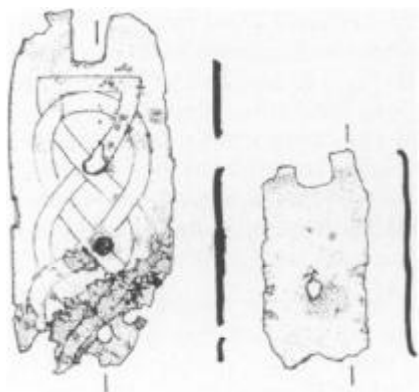


Fig. 47 Strap-tag from Balally, county Dublin (Scale 1:1).

48mm in maximum length, 21mm in width and 0.4mm in thickness. The second fragment is 29mm in length and 14mm in width. The larger fragment is flat and broadly rectangular in shape, with rounded corners at one end where it was connected to the smaller fragment. There is a trapezoidal niche in the metal at this end, 5mm in width, through which the tongue protruded. It defines two narrow strips, 7.1mm in maximum width, which joined the two fragments and held the loop in place. The ends of these strips are bent at right angles to the plane of the object, indicating that the second fragment was originally linked parallel to this piece. Between them they would have held a (presumably) leather strap or belt in place with iron rivets. The other end has been considerably damaged and the edges are jagged.

On the upper face a band of simple two-band plait design interlacing has been incised onto the surface of the metal. This covers 40mm of the length of the remaining surface and is up to 15mm in width. It consists of two bands each *c.* 2.5mm in thickness which separate when they cross a third; one passing over and the other under. The loop of the band, which forms the narrow edge of the design, has been flattened and the two ends, which alternately cross over and under the end of the loop formed by the second band, which is flush with the first, then cross over each other, creating a distinctive stirrup shape. Through this design three holes have been cut. The one closest to the rectangular notch is triangular in shape, 4.5mm in maximum width and has been placed where the ends of the stirrup band cross over. The other two are circular, 3mm in diameter and placed slightly off the centre of the design. One is filled with a small quantity of oxidised metal, the remains of an iron rivet. The back of the object is plain. The surface is uneven with a number of pockmarks indicating corrosion of the metal.

The strap-tag was manufactured by hammering sheet bronze and the niche cut out. The tongue would probably have been made of sheet bronze as well, cut to the desired size

no finds. A sherd of medieval cooking pot (NMI E 574:2) was found nearby but was not in association.

Situated to the south-east of the Church is a rectangular-sectioned standing stone 1.35m in height. The area around the stone was investigated in three cuttings (Nos. 15, 27 & 29) but no socket stones or associated features were noted. Therefore the period at which this stone was raised has not been established. Its absence from any earlier account of the site may indicate that it is a modern addition.

THE FINDS

Metal: (1) NMI E 574:1: These two bronze fragments together formed the upper and lower plates of a strap-tag, with the loop and tongue missing. They were found in the upper portion of the fill of a pit (F 6) in Cutting 13, in a layer of grey/brown coloured sandy humus. The larger piece is

and looped around the ring. In her study of Irish first millennium belt buckles O'Sullivan (1984) included forty-two examples of which fourteen were decorated. This example can be compared to her buckles from Ballywee, county Antrim (Lynn 1988, 35, Fig. 43), with its ornate decoration of trumpet spirals, and an undecorated example from Lagore, county Meath (O'Sullivan 1984:111 & 142, Figs. 15 A & B, Pls. 1 & 34). The former was found at the base of the topsoil of a ringfort and the latter is an unstratified find from the crannóg. O'Sullivan placed this class into her later period stretching from the seventh to tenth centuries. A buckle with similar interlaced decoration is known from the Edenvale Cave, county Clare (Scharff et al. 1906:70-71, 1 Fig.). Strap mounts of similar manufacture with interlaced decoration are also known from the Viking grave at Balladoole in the Isle of Man (Bersu and Wilson 1966, 20-23, Figs. 11-15).

Pottery: (2) NMI E 574:2: Seven large sherds of a coarse handmade pottery (not illustrated), gritted with mica and quartz and reduced to a dark colour on the exterior, but with a reddish interior. Found in the top of the subsoil below the ploughsoil in Cutting 11. In situ they formed a single sherd of Leinster Cooking Ware (Ó Floinn 1988) measuring 95 by 68mm and 8mm in thickness.

(3) NMI E 574:3: Four small pottery sherds similar to those noted above from the ploughsoil of Cutting 1. The largest is 14mm in diameter and they are 6mm in thickness.

(4) NMI E 574:4: Five sherds of pottery, including a base sherd, of the same type noted above from the ploughsoil of Cutting 10. The base sherd is 29 by 21mm in diameter and 10mm in maximum thickness and came from a flat-bottomed vessel.

COMMENT

Although the investigation took place within the enclosure of what appears to be a pre-Norman ecclesiastical site, both features and finds were meagre. Feature 6 with its metalwork, charcoal and animal bone can be placed within the last three centuries of the first millennium, but the charcoal-filled Features 7 and 9 are less easily interpreted. Medieval activity on the site is confirmed by the presence of a number of sherds of Leinster Cooking Wares which date broadly to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries.

APPENDIX

THE ANIMAL BONE FROM THE PIT, F 6, BALALLY, COUNTY DUBLIN

A total of 239 bone fragments were recovered from the pit, F 6, of which 84% were unidentifiable to species level. The greater proportion of this latter material consisted of small splinters in addition to rib blade and longbone shaft fragments. The animal species represented were cattle, with thirteen fragments representing at least three animals; pig, with twelve fragments representing a single animal; and sheep/goat, with twelve fragments representing at least two adult animals. A single longbone fragment may belong to red deer. The occurrence of a small number of chop marks on certain of the fragments indicates that the remains were discarded food refuse.

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