

# Britain & Ireland's Walling Treasures: Irish Stone Forts No.2



Environment Dept. Environment, Government, Eire

We continue our look at Irish stone forts on the Aran Islands (Áirann), a group of 3 small islands located in Galway bay off the west coast of Eire. Geologically they are an extension of the Burren limestone plateau, and their total land mass of 18 square miles is home to an estimated 1500 miles of wall – the subject of an earlier episode in this series<sup>i</sup>. Their isolation might help explain why they are also the home to some of the best preserved of the stone forts. There are seven forts: 4 on Inis Mór, 2 on Inis Meáin, and 1 on Inis Óirr. None was immune from the attentions of the Victorians, with all 7 restored in some way. There is photographic evidence from this time that the walls were more or less at the heights they are today, but that the degradation of the interior faces, and tiers was quite bad.<sup>ii</sup>

The fort on Inis Óirr is much dilapidated and changed ('modernised' as the site of a 14/15<sup>th</sup> Century Tower), and I have yet to visit Inis Meáin so here I shall concentrate on Inis Mór.

Dún Eochla situated fairly centrally near the highest point on Inis Mór (shown above) typifies the ring shape seen in part 1 ("Waller and Dyker", summer 2011) and is a fine example of the bivallate form, with its distinctive outer defensive wall. The slightly squashed circle is around 27m x 22m and the subdivisions between the two walls are a

much more modern addition. Here John O'Donovan, who chronicled many of Eire's ruins in "Letters to the Ordnance Survey" in the mid 1830s to mid 40s, recorded 3 tiers, 3 sets of steps and two internal buildings<sup>iii</sup>. There are now more



Dún Eochta, Inner ramparts and buttress.



Dún Eochla stonework, ancient or modern?

steps, fewer tiers and only one circular structure, all probably the result of 1880s restoration – how else do you make it safe for visitors to walk on the upper level and what else do you do with the left over stone? At this time buttresses were also added to stabilise bulges in the rampart, which is around 5m high and 4m thick<sup>iv</sup>. It's not difficult to imagine 2 or 3 different hands in the stonework.



Eoghanachta's widened upper rampart

Similar changes have happened at the similarly sized, but univallate Dún Eoghanachta with its nearly 5m high and thick walls restored in 1884.<sup>v</sup> Situated towards the western end of the island, again near a high point, it unlike the other Inis Mór forts, remains un-buttressed, although the entrance is much changed. In 1839



Dún Eoghanachta entrance

O'Donovan noted that it was 40 inches wide and stated that he was not able to determine much else. In 1910 Westropp noted that it had been rebuilt and was now six feet wide, much as it is today (and it's significantly lower than the bulk of the ramparts).<sup>vi</sup>

At both Eochla and Eoghanachta the "ladder" steps are somewhat vertiginous, with very tall risers and narrow treads. As was noted in part 1 these could be a Victorian affectation or they could have been based on the original. The Áirann forts tend not to have the 'X' style steps seen in the last instalment, and all 4 on



**Ladder step, with staircase above, Dún Eoghanachta**

Inis Mór have examples of the ladder type. These steps are remarkably similar in design (especially with the associated staircases) to those sketched in plan and feature by Westropp in 1913 as part of his survey of Caherahoagh on the Burren, noted by Elizabeth Fitzpatrick as fitting in with late medieval masonry styles.<sup>vii</sup> That is well beyond my knowledge and it is unclear if this remote fort was renovated by the Victorians, it does however perhaps point to the idea that the Victorians modelled at least some of their stairways on the existing, even if that in itself might not have been original.



**Dún Eoghanachta stonework, with joint**

I did come across one other interesting theory with regard to fort construction, in Tim Robinson's "*Stones of Aran: Labyrinth*" where he suggests that Eoghanachta might have been built in sections as there are long running joints in the outer face.<sup>viii</sup> I didn't notice these, but then I hadn't heard the theory and wasn't looking for them, although this photo does suggest it might be possible to add some credence to the idea, or is it just a bad Victorian repair? That said the

stonework here does appear more consistent/uniform than that at Eochta.

Little is known about the history of these two forts, excavations have centred on another Inis Mór fort, Dún Aonghasa (aka Dún Aengus). As part of Eire's "Discovery Programme" there was limited excavation of Eoghanachta suggesting building around 650-800 AD.<sup>ix</sup> Generally it is assumed that Eochta was of a similar era. Both of Inis Mór's other forts, Aonghasa and Dún Dúchatair are thought to be much older, but also in use during this time.

At this time Áirann was becoming an important monastic site. It is thought that the forts were status dwellings, probably of large farming clans. The two inland sites do command the high ground so they could easily be defensive, but equally perhaps sited to make a statement, with the occupants possibly deriving their wealth from servicing the ecclesiastic trade, and perhaps from monastic patronage.<sup>x</sup>

Whilst Eochla and Eoghanachta are inland forts, Aonghasa and Dúchatair are located on cliff tops, and form a slight subdivision of the stone fort category, that of promontory forts... next time.

Sean Adcock

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<sup>i</sup> Waller & Dyker, Winter 2009. See also <http://www.wallingwonderland.info/Pages/Aran.html>

<sup>ii</sup> Corns. A. (2002) The Aran Islands. [www.discoveryprogramme.ie/research/western-stone-forts-aran-islands.html](http://www.discoveryprogramme.ie/research/western-stone-forts-aran-islands.html) (extracted 28.10.2011)

<sup>iii</sup> Robinson T (1997) *Stones of Aran: Labyrinth* Penguin. p 202

<sup>iv</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>v</sup> *Op cit.* p.419-20

<sup>vi</sup> *Op cit.* p. 419

<sup>vii</sup> Fitzpatrick.E (2009) , *Native Enclosed Settlement and the Problem of the Irish 'Ring-fort'*. *Medieval Archeology*, Vol.53. p.295-6. See also

[www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archeology/arch\\_burren/part1\\_kilnaboy\\_parish\\_caherahoagh.htm](http://www.clarelibrary.ie/eolas/coclare/archeology/arch_burren/part1_kilnaboy_parish_caherahoagh.htm) (accessed 28.10.2011). Westropp thought the steps possibly late 15<sup>th</sup> and gives the impression he hadn't seen many similar designs.

<sup>viii</sup> Robinson (1997), p.419

<sup>ix</sup> Corns. A. (2002) Dún Eoghanachta. <http://www.discoveryprogramme.ie/research/western-stone-forts/98-dun-eoghanachta.html> (extracted 28.10.2011)

<sup>x</sup> *ibid* and also see Laheen M (2010). "*Dry stone Walls of the Aran Islands*". Collins, Cork. p.28