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Castle Guard, Ardee

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Castle Guard, Ardee.

ABOUT a quarter of a mile south-east of Ardee stands the remarkable mound locally known as "The Priest's Mount," and marked on the ordnance map as "Dawson's Fort," but whose real name is "Castle Guard," which latter name is but the rendering in English of the sound of the Irish name, "Caiseal Guth-aird," i.e., the stone fort of the high voice.

Seen from the road the mound apparently presents no features of special interest, but on nearer approach and inspection one is forcibly impressed with the huge expenditure of human labour that its erection must have entailed at a time when modern mechanical appliances were undreamt of. Gigantic as its proportions appear at the present day, they compare unfavourably with its former size, for Wright in his "Louthiana" states that—"the perpendicular height of the mound from the bed of its foundation is nearly 90ft., and the depth of the main trench between 30 and 40; the circumference at the top is not less than 140 and round the foundations upwards of 600 feet." At the present time the height does not exceed 50 feet—possibly not quite so much—while the circumference at the top is much nearer 200 than 140 feet.

Mr. Dolan, in whose possession it is at present, informed me that about 80 years ago it was owned by a Dr. Blackhall, who built a summer-house on top; and subsequently by a Parish Priest—Rev. Canon Levins, P.P.—who planted a hedge round the summit. From the latter owner it no doubt derived its present local name. Judging by the reduced height, and the enlarged circumference of the top, it is evident that some of the upper portion has been removed since Wright's time (1748).

It is most likely that the main trench which that writer states to have been between 30 and 40 feet deep, and which is now barely 5 feet in depth, has been filled with material taken from the top of the mound. At the period of Wright's description the mound was encircled by a double ditch and vallum, and on its summit were still traceable the foundations of two concentric octagonal buildings—the interior one being probably a tower or castle and the outer a kind of breast-work or parapet. The remains of the double circumvallation can still be distinctly traced, but no vestige remains of the foundations on the summit.

Evidently much impressed by the size and appearance of this remarkable structure, Wright goes on to say that "this is manifestly a work of great labour, and undoubtedly designed at first for a memorial of something worthy of being long remembered"; and then concludes that it must have been a sepulchral

monument or burial-place of some of the Irish kings. It is abundantly clear, both from Wright's description and from the appearance of the place itself, that it must have been designed and constructed with a special view to its defence against an enemy. Indeed, at the period of its construction, and for many centuries afterwards, it must have been considered practically impregnable; for the defences are (or rather were) such that a small garrison could keep at bay an entire army, unless starvation or modern engines of destruction were employed against it. The fact that it is surrounded by a double ditch indicates that it was a royal rath or dun, for it is expressly laid down in the "Crith Gabhlach," an ancient law tract, that the dun of a king could not by law have less than two surrounding walls with water between. It is interesting to remark that this law was rigidly observed in the construction of the royal raths at Tara.

As to when or by whom the mound was originally constructed there is now no reliable evidence forthcoming. I would however hazard the suggestion that the following translation of a passage in the *Leabhar na h Uidhre* (*Tain bo Chuailgne*) may not be unconnected with its foundation. "The four provinces of Erin made a dun and an encampment in the *Brisleach Mor* in the plain of *Muirtheimhne*." Whether or not this passage accounts for its origin future research may determine, but that it was the scene of a very important episode in Irish history I shall, I hope, succeed in showing.

After the conversion of the Irish to Christianity by St. Patrick, it became necessary to bring the code of laws in use in ancient Erin into harmony with the principles of the new faith. For this purpose a "royal commission" was constituted—and a right royal commission it undoubtedly was—consisting as it did of three kings, three bishops and three men learned in law and science, as is recorded in the *Seanchus Mor* itself, the great book containing the revised code resulting from their labours.

"Laeghaire, Corc, Dairi the hardy
Patrick, Benen, Cairneach the just.
Rossa, Dubhthach, Ferghus with science.
These were the nine pillars of the *Seanchus Mor*."

The following is a translation of the opening paragraph of the introduction to this famous book:—

"The place of this Poem and the place of the *Seanchus* was *Teamhair*, in the summer and in the autumn, on account of its cleanness and pleasantness in these seasons; and *Rath-guthaird*, where the stone of Patrick is at this day, in *Glenn-na-mbodhur*, near *Nith nemonnach*, was the place during winter and spring, on account of the nearness of its fire-wood and its water, and on account of its warmth in the time of winter's cold."

In a note to the above passage the learned Dr. O'Donovan states: "Nith was the ancient name of the river of Ardee; flowing through the plains of *Conaile Muirtheimhne* in the county of Louth." The irruption of the river Nith into the plain of *Magh Murtheimhne* is mentioned in the *Annals of the Four Masters* under the year 4169, A.M. The following passage from the "*Brisleach Mor Magh Murtheimhne*" attests the accuracy of O'Donovan's judgment. "Conchobhar said, 'I know: take him (*Cuchulainn*) this day into *Glenn-na-mbodhar*' (i.e., the glen of the Deaf, so called for the reason that were all the men of Erin round about it and loudly uttering their cries of war, yet might none in that glen hear either shout or halloo).

Mr. Peter O'Brien, of Stabannon National School, told me that he often heard

his father speaks of Glenmore as the name of a place near Smarmore, and the old man on being questioned by Mr. Dolan replied, without any suggestion being made to him, that he heard of the name as belonging to some place about or beyond Glen Kieran. He however made it rather Cluain Mor. Perhaps from personal knowledge or local enquiry some reader of this Journal may be able to throw additional light on the situation of the place which bears this name. The place called Rath-guthaird, i.e. the rath of the high voice is undoubtedly Castle Guard. Caiseals (or Cashels) i.e., stone forts, did not come into use in Ireland until about the middle of the seventh century ; so that at the period of the compilation of the *Seanchus Mor*, A.D. 438 to 441, it would be simply Rath-guthaird and not Caiseal-guthaird. That a Caiseal subsequently occupied the summit of the mound there is the authority of Wright for asserting. It is very natural to think that on the erection of the Caiseal the name changed from Rath-guthaird to Caiseal-guthaird—a name it still bears. An almost parallel instance of such a change of name may be cited in the case of Cathair-dun-iascaig, the ancient name of Cahir in the county of Tipperary, where the cathair was built on the dun, both names however being in this instance retained in the Irish name.

Of the "Stone of Patrick" I have been unable to trace any remains. Hancock, the editor of the *Seanchus Mor*, states that there is marked on the ordnance map near Nobber, at the source of the Nith, a place called Patrick's Stone, and on this authority alone he places Rath-guthaird at a fort called Lis-anawer at this spot. He states that he examined the course of the Nith from its source to its mouth by the aid of the map but was unable to discover Rath-guthaird. His failure is, no doubt, due to the circumstance mentioned above, that the name given on the ordnance map is "Dawson's Fort" and not "Castle Guard."

Standing on the summit of the mound and looking eastward along the valley which, no doubt, once bore the name of Glenn-na-mbodhar, through which the Dee winds its way to the sea, may be described the Catholic Church, Stabbannon, which still commemorates the name of one of the illustrious "nine pillars of the *Seanchus Mor*," viz., Benen or Beignus, who, of Munster origin, was St. Patrick's successor in the See of Armagh. Glistening and white in the unclouded splendour of the May-day sun rose the graceful spire of the new church, as if to remind the beholder that though time may lay its levelling hand on the human monuments of departed glory, it but intensifies and exalts the undying splendour of that wonderful edifice which St. Patrick, as the humble instrument of Divine Providence, placed on such an enduring foundation that it seems but to acquire the characteristics of youth from its hoary antiquity.

THOMAS BARRY.