

# Dún an Óir 1580: The Potential for Intact Siege Archaeology

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## **Abstract**

The events of November 1580 at Dún an Óir have left a permanent mark on Irish history. The key events of this brief siege are still hotly debated, with particular focus on the massacre of Spanish, Italian, Basques and Irish following the fort's capitulation; was the surrender conditional or unconditional? Did Lord Grey break his word? What was the extent of Walter Raleigh's involvement? Such questions continue to fascinate. It is perhaps less well known that the site of Dún an Óir may well represent a practically unique opportunity for Irish archaeologists – an opportunity to examine a 16th-century siege site where both the positions of the besiegers and the besieged remain greenfield. This paper will explore the archaeological potential of the site of Dún an Óir, and highlight the importance of carrying out archaeological research before more of the site is lost to the sea.

## **Introduction**

The Second Desmond War devastated much of the south of Ireland between 1579 and 1583. The conflict saw the destruction of the powerful earldom of Desmond and the death of thousands of civilians in the region. It is not the purpose of this paper to detail the causes and course of the conflict, a task which has been previously completed by historians. However, it is appropriate to note that the war represented a conflict between the Anglo-Irish Fitzgeralds of Desmond and their Gaelic Irish allies against the Crown forces acting for Queen Elizabeth I of England. The war is particularly significant in that it was one of the first rebellions in Ireland to use the Counter-Reformation as a tool in opposing the English. In addition it saw the first intervention of foreign troops in Ireland during the course of Elizabeth's reign, when a Papal force of Italians, Spanish and Basques landed at the fort of Dún an Óir in County Kerry. The latter site is not the only engagement of the war that may benefit from the application of conflict archaeology techniques; other notable battles which almost certainly left a trace in the

archaeological record include Springfield (on the Limerick-Tipperary border), Monasternenagh (County Limerick) and Glenmalure (County Wicklow).

### **The Siege**

The events of the siege of Dún an Óir are well documented, with a number of extant eye-witness accounts (O’Rahilly, 1938). The fort is situated on a windswept and isolated promontory, in what was an extremely untenable position from a military perspective; among the key necessities absent from its confines was fresh water, a disastrous shortcoming when expecting a siege. The fort is thought to have got its name, the “fort of gold”, following the wrecking of one of Martin Frobisher’s “gold” fleet on its return to England from North America (Berleth 1978: 163). It was subsequently discovered that the ships had risked all for pyrite, “fool’s gold”.

In 1580 some 400-500 Italians, Spanish and Basque troops landed in support of the rebellion under the command of Colonel Sebastian da San Guiseppe, an Italian. The English soon concentrated all their strength on this dangerous incursion into Ireland, and the queen’s ships under Admiral William Winter entered the harbour to bombard the enemy positions from the seaward side. The land troops under Lord Deputy Grey de Wilton completed the encirclement of the position and progressed siege works in November. This involved the construction of siege trenches in order to batter the fort with artillery, an activity which the besieged troops attempted to disrupt with sallies. After some three days “...the fort was yielded; all the Irish men and women hanged, and upwards of 400 Italians, Spaniard, Basques and others put to the sword” (Calendar of State Papers 1574-1585; 267). It is unclear why the papal troops stayed in their fort and allowed themselves to become besieged so easily. Perhaps there is some truth to the surviving officers’ later claim that the Desmond forces in the surrounding hills were due to attack the English in the rear once the siege got underway, although it seems unlikely that a Gaelic Irish army would have been willing to take on such a large number of English troops on open terrain, where advantages such as superior cavalry would tell in the Crown forces’ favour. What is clear is that there are a number of elements to the siege which are likely to have left an archaeological trace. This includes the construction and improvement of the fort, the construction of the besiegers’ trenches, the material and ammunition lost, discarded and expended during the course of the siege, and potentially the human remains of those who lost their lives on both sides.

### **Battlefield and siege archaeology in Ireland**

Battlefield archaeology is its infancy in Ireland. The archaeological study of battlefield sites was pioneered in the United States with Dr Douglas Scott's investigation of the site of Custer's Last Stand at the Little Big Horn (Scott: 1987). It is now widely employed in the United States, Britain and much of Europe. This increased awareness of the archaeological value of these sites has led to the drawing up of battlefield registers in Britain to help protect the resource. Ireland is beginning to recognise the importance of such fields of conflict, with the Irish Battlefields Project established in 2006 by the Department of the Environment, Heritage and Local Government to assess the possibilities of protecting some of our more important sites. Battlefields such as the Yellow Ford (1598), Kinsale (1601), the Boyne (1690) and Aughrim (1691) have already begun to yield important archaeological evidence.

What then of siege sites? Throughout much of the history of the island siege warfare, not major battles, dominated the conflicts which took place here. However, by their nature they generally occurred at important strategic towns and cities, be they a supply centre, a major junction, a river crossing, etc. The subsequent development of these population centres has led to the destruction of much of the original siege positions. As a result, Ireland, like the majority of European countries, is poorly off when it comes to well-preserved siege archaeology. Archaeological material relating to sieges has been recovered from towns such as Athlone and Limerick, but the majority of this has come from riverine deposits, with the notable exception of the siege mines and counter-mines dating to 1642 from King John's Castle, Limerick (Wiggins: 2001). Only a handful of siege sites remain totally greenfield, allowing the archaeologist to explore both the besiegers' and besieged positions in detail. In this writer's opinion, two examples are of particular note: Ballymore, County Westmeath (Shiels 2007a: 180-183), the site of a siege in 1691, and Dún an Óir. Dún an Óir is special for a number of reasons: the site remains greenfield, heightening the potential for extensive archaeological survival; a number of accounts exist for the engagement; the action remains an important event in Irish history, and it is a rare example of a relatively well-defined conflict site from the Elizabethan period.

### **Dún an Óir: the known archaeology**

Our present state of knowledge concerning the archaeology at Dún an Óir is quite good. The fort itself has been archaeologically planned

and described (Gowen: 1979; Cuppage: 1986). The landward defences of the fort survive clearly on the ground, with the defensive bastions discernable. The field beside the fort on its south-eastern side is traditionally known as Gort na Gearradh, “the field of the cutting”, the supposed site of the massacre of the defenders by Lord Deputy Grey’s forces (Cuppage: 1986, 425). Local tradition also states that following the dumping of the bodies in the sea they subsequently washed up at Teampall Bán and were interred there (*ibid*, 425). Recent excavations have produced a number of burials associated with medieval activity in this location (Bennett 1996 and 2005), but as yet no conclusive evidence has been found to link them with the 1580 massacre. It would seem likely that the bodies of the dead were thrown into the sea for ease of disposal, and future study may well reveal that some of the remains located here are indeed victims of the massacre.

As has often been the case with many of these conflict sites, illegal finds retrieval has taken place in the environs of the fort. Fortunately the material was recovered, and there are currently artefacts from Dún an Óir in the Kerry Museums and in the National Museum of Ireland, Kildare Street. These artefacts, which include items such as munitions, a 16th-century buckle, a lead ingot and a post-medieval pottery sherd (Snoddy 1972: 247-8), are testament to the potential surviving archaeology at the site. Some of the material still held by the National Museum of Ireland is illustrated in Figure 1. Of particular interest are the fragments of exploded gun barrel and small calibre cannonball recovered. It is unclear if the barrel was accidentally or intentionally destroyed, but it is conceivable that the troops within the fort decided to sabotage their own gun before surrendering, as it has clearly been ripped apart with tremendous force, suggesting a major explosion within the gun itself. The cannonball has a maximum diameter of some 2.1 inches, suggesting that it was most probably fired from a gun such as a falconet (Biddle *et al.* 2001: 191). The gun that fired such a projectile would have been in the region of 9 feet in length, weighing some 500lbs (Henry 2005: 9). The recovery of artefacts such as these is an example of how archaeological material can be utilised effectively to reconstruct certain aspects of a siege or battle.

It is quite clear then that there is evidence for good archaeological survival of artefacts from the 1580 siege, and that the position of the besieged is largely intact. The next step is to attempt to project the probable location of the besiegers’ positions.

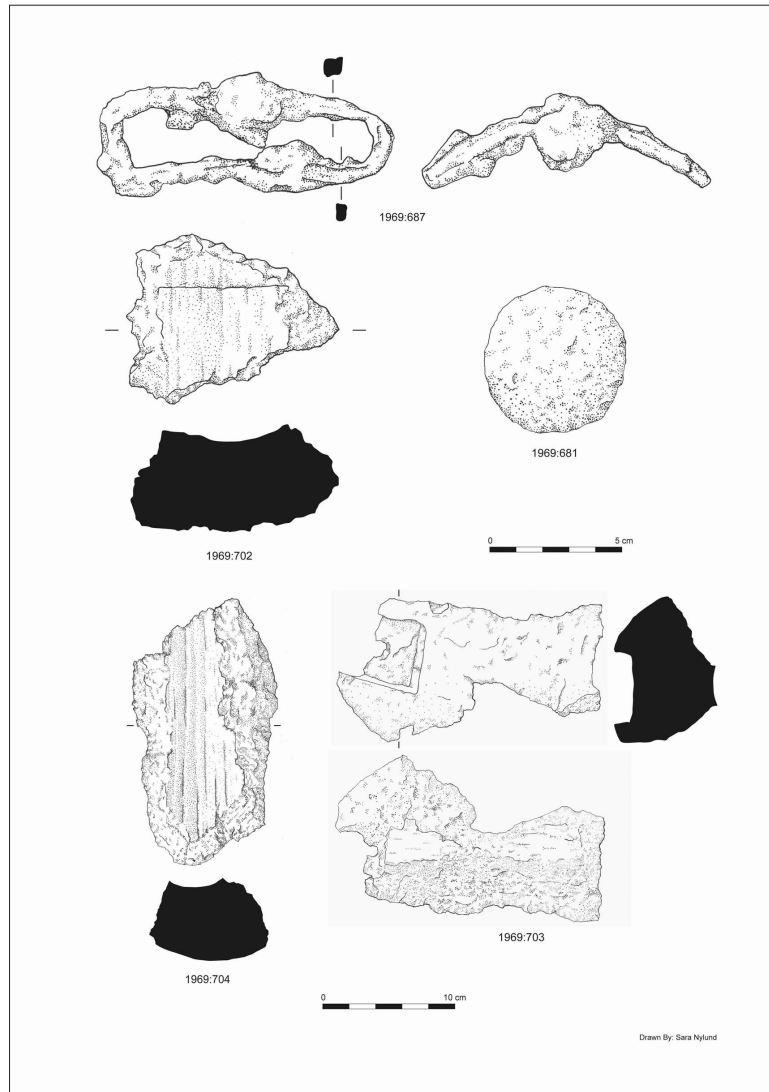


Fig. 1.

Dún an Óir finds in the National Museum of Ireland; 1969:687 Possible Buckle, 1969:681 Cannonball, 1969:702, 1969:703, 1969:704 Pieces of Exploded Gun Barrel. (illustrations by Sara Nylund)

### **Locating the invisible archaeology at Dún an Óir**

We know that the English forces constructed trenches around Dún an Óir during the siege. The Calendar of State Papers makes reference to trench work on the evening of 7 November, which was “advanced” on the 8 November (Calendar of State Papers, Ireland 1574-1585, cited in O’Rahilly 1938: 3). The fact that the site remains greenfield indicates that there is a good possibility that these trenches survive archaeologically in the ground. In an attempt to suggest a probable location for these remains, we must turn to the records left behind by the participants. We are fortunate in that the 1580 siege of Dún an Óir was depicted on two contemporary battle maps. These are held in the National Maritime Museum, Greenwich, and the Public Record Office, Kew. A close study of the maps has revealed that the Public Record Office example, drawn by Admiral William Winter, is most probably the more accurate (Shiels in press). We know Winter was present as he commanded the Queen’s ships during the engagement. His map shows the harbour and peninsula with the fort under siege and the English fleet bombarding it. The English camp is shown in extended line along the nearby beach. At first glance, Winter’s depiction does not seem to hold much promise for locating potential archaeological sites, as he pays only scant attention to accurately portraying the peninsula and harbour. However, detailed study reveals that Winter was concentrating principally on the fort and siege works around it, as this was the most important aspect of his study. His depiction of the fort itself shows internal buildings, which we know existed, as a “timber penthouse” is referred to in the contemporary documents (O’Rahilly 1938: 3).

The key factor in discovering that this map may be of use in determining the location of the English siege trenches is the astounding accuracy of the depiction of Dún an Óir itself. When the Winter version is placed side by side with the modern archaeological drawing, the similarities between the two are astounding (See Fig. 2). This suggests that Winter was well aware of the precise setting and layout of the fort when he drew his plan. He depicts the English siege trenches, which are not portrayed as fully enclosing the fort; rather they are concentrated on its south-eastern side, in the vicinity of Gort na Gearradh. From here they curve around to face on to the main fort entrance. An inspection of the field in question reveals that it is indeed a likely candidate for the location of the English trenches. It is known from the historical sources that the English forces advanced from the vicinity of the beach to the south-east. This being the case, they would have had to traverse this field

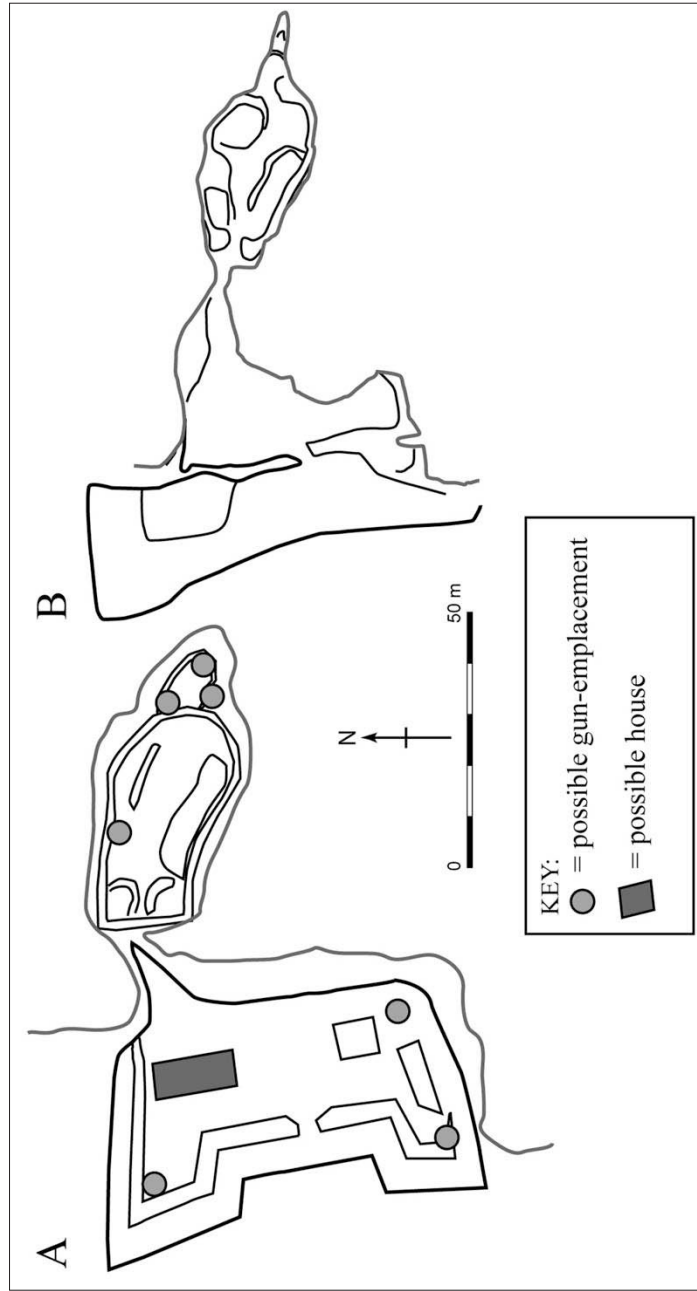


Fig. 2. Dún an Óir comparative analysis; A: Fort as it appears on 1580 Winter Map (after Nylund)  
B: Fort as it appears archaeologically today (after Gowen)

on their way to the fort. In addition, the English would not have wanted to begin construction of their siege works in a position exposed to fire from Dún an Óir. Standard practice at the time was to begin work either out of range of, or under cover from, the enemy's guns. There are few places around the fort which fit these criteria, but once again there is a pronounced fall off in the ground in this field which shields it from fire (See Plate). Choosing this location would have allowed the English to begin work close to the fort itself, but well protected from enemy fire. It would seem likely, therefore, that the English may well have begun their trenches below this dip, gradually advancing their works to bring their fire to bear on the fort's defences.



Plate. The fall off in ground level at Gort na Gearradh, where the English may have begun trench construction.

The potential for archaeological work does not end there, however. Ongoing historical research is bringing to light information relating to the potential location of the main English camp during the siege, which with further inspection may also be amenable to archaeological investigation. (For an example of this research, see Mullan, this volume.) In addition, the sizeable English fleet which battered the fort from its seaward side is worthy of study, particularly in a marine archaeological context close to Dún an Óir.

### **A proposed methodology**

From an analysis of the archaeological remains on the ground, the artefacts recovered, the primary accounts and the cartographic and landscape evidence, it becomes possible to view Dún an Óir not just as a small isolated fortification, but rather as an intact siege landscape of national and international importance. As such it should be identified as a key site for further archaeological research in the years ahead. To accomplish this, a multi-disciplined approach should be adopted. Phase I of any such project should include a detailed historical study of the available primary sources to extract all potential location indicators relating to the siege itself. In addition, key events throughout the siege and massacre should be noted for referral during the archaeological phase. Further cartographic and landscape analysis would also assist in identifying where any archaeological work should commence. A similar approach by the Kinsale Battlefield Project in relation to that engagement has led to a number of key sites being identified and located (Shiels 2007b: 4-7).

Subsequent to the completion of the historical and desk-based research, Phase II should involve the archaeological fieldwork itself. Depending on the results of Phase I, sites such as the fort, the English siege trenches and the encampment could be investigated. Initial work surrounding the fort should include a topographical and geophysical survey to ascertain if any sub-surface archaeology such as siege trenches (or graves) can be identified using non-intrusive methods. Gort na Gearradh to the south-east should be a priority for the application of these techniques. In addition, a licensed metal-detection survey, undertaken under the supervision of a qualified archaeologist, should be carried out in the topsoil levels to determine what percentage of material has survived and to indicate high-concentration areas. A detailed record of the find spot of any material recovered during this procedure would be vital to the later interpretation of events. Following this work it should be possible to target any subsequent excavation to the zones of highest archaeological potential.

As for Dún an Óir itself, the site, although well preserved at present, is under serious threat. As any visitor to the site over the last number of years will have noted, the promontory point of the fort has been fenced off, as it is now too dangerous to access. This continued erosion of the fort needs to be urgently addressed, and a rescue excavation considered. It is clear from the surviving structures in the interior of Dún an Óir that significant archaeological remains survive *in situ*. However, the fact that

much of the fort has been lost over the centuries is clear when one refers again to the comparison between Winter's map and the modern archaeological example (Figure 2). Archaeological study in the interior should initially concentrate on the application of further non-intrusive techniques such as topographical and geophysical survey, with the excavation of the promontory point also considered. In addition, a trench placed across the bastion and outer defences would add much to our knowledge of the preparedness of the defenders in November 1580.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this article has been to highlight the importance of the site of Dún an Óir both nationally and internationally, as well as to stress that archaeological remains relating to the 1580 siege may lie beyond the confines of the fort itself. Although the site remains greenfield, the threat of erosion to this potentially pristine siege landscape should not be underestimated, and it is vital that steps are taken in the near future to prevent the further loss of archaeological information. The scarcity of similar sites in Ireland and beyond has been highlighted. It is rare indeed for archaeologists to be presented with a virtually unchanged landscape following the passage of almost 500 years of history. To be presented with such a landscape armed with the contemporary information amassed by historians on the events which unfolded there is rarer still. The fort of Dún an Óir presents a unique opportunity for Irish archaeologists to significantly contribute to our understanding of not only siege archaeology, but the archaeology of colonial Ireland as a whole.

### **Note about the author**

Damian Shiels MA is the post excavation manager with Headland Archaeology Ltd. He has worked on excavations across the Republic of Ireland since 1995, and is eligible to hold an archaeological excavation licence. He was previously an assistant keeper in the National Museum of Ireland, working with their military collections, and has a long-standing interest in conflict archaeology, founding the Kinsale Battlefield Project in 2001.

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