

Memory and the Cillins of Achill Island

Stefanie Mills

STEFANIE.2.MILLS@ucdenver.edu

Abstract

The Cillins of Ireland are a subject that archaeologists must treat with considerable sensitivity. This short paper looks at the different Cillins on Achill Island and examines the processes through which they have been forgotten or remembered. A number of the Achill Cillins are well maintained and feature recent monuments marking the masses held at the site following the reversal of church policy towards those buried at the sites in 2000. Other sites are overgrown and left untended but have not necessarily been forgotten yet. Finally the sites and monuments record lists a number of sites where no physical traces can be identified and the exact location is uncertain. This last group is essentially only known about because of place names or recollections of residents who discussed the sites with archaeologists surveying the county. Site visits and surveys performed at different Cillini locations on the island allow us to examine which sites have been purposefully remembered, which are fading from prominence and which have become little more than a vague idea. By comparing the siting and design of the sites and their relationship to the settlement pattern some suggestions can be made as to why some sites have been selected for remembrance and others are slowly being forgotten.

Introduction

Children's burial grounds or Cillíns are a well known if poorly understood type of Irish archaeological monument class. The National Monuments Services class description provides a clear indication of the function of the sites and suggests a date range but fails to indicate the variety of forms encompassed by the term,

"An area of unconsecrated ground for the interment of unbaptised or stillborn children, often known under various Irish names: Cillín, Caldragh, Ceallúnach or Calluragh. The graves were generally marked by simple, low, upright stones or slabs almost invariably without any inscription or other carving. This burial practice may be medieval in origin and continued in Ireland until the 1960s."

In the field known Cillín locations may be represented by an apparently unmarked area of ground, groups of unenclosed grave markers, small enclosed plots with or without visible grave markers, and by a number of re-purposed archaeological sites such as prehistoric burial mounds and Early Medieval ringforts. There has been a considerable amount of confusion about the date of Cillíns. Whilst their use extended well into the 20th century the period when they first came into use has proved harder to establish. The Cillíns went out of use after changes to Catholic doctrine and practice resulting from the Second Vatican Council (1962-65). On Achill Island blessing ceremonies have been organized at a small number of sites on the Island during and after the year 2000 with the cooperation from the Mayo County Council, and similar events have occurred across Ireland. Where a ceremony has taken place, the erection of a plaque and a small monument of

some type commonly commemorate it (The Irish Times 2014).

Less than twenty Cillíns have been excavated under modern conditions and all of those that could be conclusively date belonged to the post-Medieval period (Donnelly & Murphy 2008, 28). In one of the earliest treatments of the subject W.G. Wood-Martin suggested that they were pagan in origin and that their use was discontinued after the introduction of Christianity, a surprising position seeing as many Cillíns would still have been in regular use during Wood-Martin's time (Donnelly & Murphy 2008, 27). The idea of prehistoric origins but with use extending into the Early Medieval period was developed by R. McNamara and later by Sean Ó Súilleabháin (Donnelly & Murphy 2008, 27). In a more recent review Colm Donnelly and Eileen Murphy have argued that whilst there would be theological grounds for having dedicated children's burial grounds throughout the Medieval period, it was perhaps not until the late 16th century reforms to Catholic doctrine and practice that there would have been a specific need for this type of site (Donnelly & Murphy 2008, 28-9). Interestingly the Neolithic Passage tombs at Fourknocks, County Meath, were reused in the Early Bronze Age for the burial of infants, and there is some rather ambiguous evidence of similar specialised infant burials at other megalithic sites in the Early Bronze Age (Finlay 2000, 413-17). This suggests that the idea of a children's burial ground is not uniquely confined to the post-Medieval period, even if the majority of sites may date from that time frame. Ultimately without further direct dating evidence from excavation clarification on the dating of the Cillíns will prove difficult to acquire. Given the sensitivity of that these sites must be approached with it is unlikely that they shall ever be excavated in large number and new research may be limited to un-invasive approaches, such as landscape analysis.

The Cillíns of Achill Island

The Sites and Monuments Record lists 15 Children's Burial Grounds on Achill Island, about 7% of the total of 219 such sites listed for County Mayo. The sites can be divided into a number of

different categories based on their current condition,

- 1) Sites that are in good condition and which feature recent dedication plaques and monuments.
- 2) Sites that are in good or reasonable condition which do not feature recent plaques or monuments
- 3) Sites that are in poor condition and which feature recent dedication plaques and monuments.
- 4) Sites that are in poor condition which do not feature recent plaques or monuments
- 5) Sites that no longer have visible remains

As is typical across Ireland the sites have quite a variety of forms, with several being located within pre-existing archaeological sites such as Early Medieval Ringforts, others located close to ecclesiastical sites, a few sites located within purpose built enclosures, and a number of sites simply but where no visible remains are present but local memories or place name evidence suggests a site in the area. It is noticeable that the majority of the sites on Achill are located very close to the sea. On the adjacent island of Achill Beg two Cillíns are located within Promontory Forts, but this association has yet to be confirmed on Achill itself, and the sites on Achill Beg are not covered in this paper.

All of the sites on Achill were subject to site visits to ascertain their exact nature. It is worth highlighting that beyond the location of the sites the National Monument Viewer (archaeology.ie) contains very little detail about these sites. During the site visits photographs of the visible elements of each sites were taken and detailed written descriptions were prepared (Table 1). The locations were also plotted onto a detailed map (Fig. 1). Finally the results were imported onto an interactive map using the ArcGIS Online software suite (<http://arcgis.is/2bqbGIG>).

Site Name	Town Land	Grid Reference (Lat. & Long.)	SMR Number	Description of Site	Location	Church Association
Salie	Keel East	53 971813 10 061747	MAD14-012	Within an enclosed field of 0.015 ha the area overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	St. Columba, Cashels
Doogaugh	Slievemore (Doogaugh)	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-019	Sub-rectangular area of which is filled with quartz boulders and clearly a sub-rectangular enclosure with a stone wall on the eastern side.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Slievemore	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-020	Within an enclosed field of 0.015 ha the area overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	St. Patrick, Cashels
Slievemore	Slievemore	53 979176 10 071930	MAD12-01007	Within the multiple plot of 0.101 ha the area overgrown and no visible markers.	0.6 km from Slievemore Rd, 0.8 km from Slievemore Road, and 2.8 km from Slievemore	Slievemore Roman Catholic
Supper 1	Doogaugh East	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-022	On a bank, within a 0.015 ha area, overgrown and no visible markers.	22 yds from Doogaugh Road	Unknown
Supper 2	Slievemore	53 979176 10 071930	MAD12-01008	On a bank, within a 0.015 ha area, overgrown and no visible markers.	17 km from Slievemore Rd, 0.8 km from Slievemore Road, and 2.8 km from Slievemore	Unknown
Boundary	Boundary	53 982821 10 071154	MAD12-01009	Within an enclosed area of 0.043 ha the area overgrown and no visible markers.	40 yds from Slievemore Rd, 0.8 km from Slievemore Road, and 2.8 km from Slievemore	Franciscan Monastery on Slievemore, Slievemore
Cashel 1	Cashel	53 950360 10 061910	MAD12-010	124.5 sq m circular area enclosed with visible markers and one adult marker.	17 yds from R120	Franciscan Monastery, Slievemore
Cashel 2	Cashel	53 950360 10 061910	MAD12-011	On a bank, within a 0.015 ha area, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Franciscan Monastery, Slievemore
Cashel 3	Cashel	53 950360 10 061910	MAD12-012	On a bank, within a 0.015 ha area, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Franciscan Monastery, Slievemore
Salie	Salie	53 949759 10 061747	MAD12-013	On a bank, within a 0.015 ha area, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Franciscan Monastery, Slievemore
Boundary	Boundary	53 982821 10 071154	MAD12-01010	Within an enclosed area of 0.043 ha the area overgrown and no visible markers.	40 yds from Slievemore Rd, 0.8 km from Slievemore Road, and 2.8 km from Slievemore	Franciscan Monastery on Slievemore, Slievemore
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-021	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-023	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-024	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-025	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-026	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-027	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-028	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels
Doogaugh	Doogaugh	53 993123 10 061910	MAD14-029	On a bank, overgrown and no visible markers.	100 yds from R120 and 160 yds from Keel Beach	Church of Assumption (Monsieur Church), Cashels

Table 1: Detailed Descriptions of Cillins on Achill



Figure 1: Map of Cillins on Achill

Results

Category 1

Doogaugh: Located on a small terrace to the East of Chongie stream close to the northern boundary of Doogaugh in Slievemore town land. The Cillin consists of a sub rectangular enclosure (36.2m X 10. 4m) defined by a low earthen bank. No burial markers can now be seen within the enclosure and apparently the stream has already washed away a commemorative plaque that had been placed at the site. The site is clearly threatened by further erosion from the adjacent stream.

Dookinella: Located on a low cliff top to the east of Keel Beach right on the Dookinella boundary next to Keel. The Cillin consists of a sub-rectangular area (28.7m X 19m) defined by a line of small quartz boulders. This Cillin is located on an elevated bank before the Holy Well. A quartz

rectangular area defines the site, with inlaid quartz burial markers. There's a monument and plaque associated with the site mentioning its blessing in 2000. The quartz within are a recent addition; when this site had been blessed the local community took the existing boulders and rocks marking the remains and removed them to replace them with quartz from the nearby quarry in Slievemore. The site is in good condition and is well kept with possible threat to erosion, associated with the Church of Assumption located within Dookinella or perhaps the Church, which had once been in Mweelin.

Category 2

Cashel 1: Located within Cashel town land, in a circular (124.5 sq./metre) area inside a sheep enclosure. This Cillin has visible markers and isn't exclusive to children as there is evidence of an adult marker, also the site is 60.6 meters away from a known ring fort. The site is heavily overgrown and from a distance doesn't seem to be anything other than a geological feature in the landscape. This site is in danger of being completely engulfed by vegetation and grass. The site is only a few meters away from currently occupied settlement within Cashel associated with the Franciscan Monastery.

Salie: Located just South of Cashel town land in Salie town land. This Cillin is within or underneath a modern house that had been renovated over an existing structure and within 0.1 kilometres of a promontory fort. It's unclear whether or not this has been marked wrong on the NMR because there's no evidence of it in site. This Cillin is within the dispersed and abandoned settlement of Salie and associated with either the Franciscan Monastery or the church in Achill Sound.

Campport: Located South of Dooga town land on the flat surface of a bank 0.1 kilometres from Campport Bay, near an older field system and 0.63 kilometres from a hut group. This Cillin has no visible markers but the land around is in reasonable condition, this site is too high above sea level to be subject to coastal erosion. The site might be associated with Dooga Church or

possibly the Church in Mweelin and isn't near any currently occupied settlement.

Ashleam 1: Located 1.12 kilometres South of Ashleam bay within Dooega town land on an elevated coastal bank, the purported Cillin is also 14.5 meters away from a stone house structure. This Cillin has been marked on the NMR map, as being on a flat surface near the coast, but has no visible markers and is in reasonable condition. It's too high above sea level to be subject of coastal erosion. This Cillin isn't near any currently occupied settlement and is associated with the church in Kildownet.

Ashleam 2: Located on a bank 1.68 kilometres from Ashleam Bay. The area of the Cillin is in reasonable condition but there are no visible markers, an old rock quarry nearby may have used any markers for their purposes. It's listed as being on the flat surface of an overgrown bank. It's not in danger of coastal erosion because it is located too high above sea level. This Cillin is a considerable distance from any currently occupied settlement and is associated with the Church in Kildownet.

Category 3

Slievemore: Located within the older medieval graveyard at the bottom of Slievemore Mountain (242.9 sq./meter area). The site is set within the Northwest corner of the older part of the graveyard and only a short distance away from the famous Deserted Village. A plaque and small monument relating to the Cillin have been placed within the more recent plot of the graveyard. The site might be associated with the Early Medieval church located within the same graveyard, but the age of the different elements in what is a complex site remain poorly understood. It is near to the current settlement within Slievemore townland, but it may have been associated with the Deserted Village.

Dugort 2: Located within Tonatanvally town land, on bog-covered sand dunes within a sub rectangular bank West of Dugort. This Cillin is located within an area of archaeological interest, including shell middens (17.9m away) and souterrains. This Cillin is immediately South of a

stone ring fort that has now been fully eroded by the sea. The Cillin could have originated within this ring fort, but as it disappeared into the sea the people may have kept burying their children there. This Cillin does have visible markers as well as a monument/plaque associated with it, but has suffered coastal erosion and continues to erode. An attempt has been made to stop this erosion but this has proven ineffective. This site doesn't seem to be associated with a particular church but is located quite close to the currently occupied settlement of Dugort.

Category 4

Keel: Located within a field enclosure to the East of Keel Beach. The Cillin presides within an earthen bank 0.19 kilometres from Keel Beach within enclosed field of a 1,315.2-sq./meter area in between two stonewall enclosures. No burial markers can now be seen within the enclosure but it is otherwise in reasonable condition and there is no immediate threat of erosion. This Cillin is close to the settlement in Keel and is possibly associated with St. Coleman's Catholic Church.

Cashel 2: Located within Cashel town land in an area of low-lying coastal peat. This Cillin could be one of two mounds, but there are no visible markers to demonstrate which of the mounds might be the Cillin. The surrounding landscape had been used for its peat resources but neither of the mounds has been affected and both are heavily overgrown. This site is in danger of being used for its peat resources and erosion from the adjacent sea. This Cillin is near a currently occupied settlement within Cashel and is associated with the Franciscan Monastery.

Cashel 3: Located South of Cashel town land, this Cillin could possibly be within a small grove of trees, but there are no visible markers to indicate it because of the heavy overgrowth. This site could be in danger of coastal erosion from the bog beach .07 kilometres away. This Cillin is associated with the Franciscan Monastery or possibly the Church in Achill Sound and is within the currently occupied settlement within Cashel.

Category 5

Dugort 1: Located on a bank on the East side of Dugort and just 0.28 kilometres from Dugort Beach. The Cillin is just on the North side of a field enclosure on an elevated earthen bank in approximately a 1,063.7-sq./meter area. No burial markers can now be seen, but the site is otherwise in reasonable condition although in danger of future coastal erosion. This site doesn't seem to be associated with a particular church but is located quite close to the currently occupied settlement of Dugort.

Bunnacurry: Located in the south of Bunnacurry townland within a large field (18,142 sq./meter area). The enclosure where this Cillin is located is currently occupied by cattle, there are no visible markers and the area is heavily overgrown. This Cillin is presumably associated with the Franciscan Monastery 0.49 kilometres away and is reasonably close to the currently occupied settlement area within Bunnacurry.

Bleanaskil: Located on North of Sraheen town land on an elevated bank along the coast. It has no visible burial markers and is heavily overgrown. This Cillin is within the dispersed settlement of Sraheen.

Discussion

Through examining the fifteen Cillins located on Achill Island a number of patterns have emerged. For instance most of the locations are along the coast with the exception of the Cillins located within Slievemore, Bunnacurry, Dooagh, and Cashel. Mothers who have lost a child through miscarriage or still birth may have an immense emotional connection to their deceased child, despite religious sanctions, and the mother and other family members may have wanted to intern the child in a place that was aesthetically pleasing. The locations in Ashleam, Campport, Slievemore, Dugort 2, Salie, and Cashel 1 are located near earlier sites. In some instances Cillins have been placed near earlier sites because it offers not only physical protection from farming and peat cutting, but also offers a visible and clearly marked location where it could be found again (Murphy 2011, 417). Some Cillins are in closer proximity to

Churches such as the Cillins in Bunnacurry, Slievemore, and Cashel 1. These particular sites, with the exception of Slievemore, are evidence of the reasonably common practice of separate children's burial grounds being placed outside but still close to consecrated grounds. The Cillin located at Slievemore is interesting because it's the only one on the island that is located within consecrated ground, although presumably this is due to subsequent boundary changes around the older part of the graveyard. Another stand-alone case was Cashel 3, which was located in the corner of a modern house. It's common on the island, cheaper and easier as well, to use an existing structure and build upon that instead of getting plans approved for a new house. It's unclear whether this location has been mapped incorrectly or it could have once been located right outside of the house, but more likely this Cillin could be located within a donkey enclosure in a nearby field.

Certain locations seem to be remembered better than others from the erection of monuments or plaques, such as Slievemore, Dugort 2, Dookinella, and at one time Dooagh, while the others on the island have been forgotten or in the process of being forgotten. The Cillin located within Dooagh once had a plaque associated with it that has now been washed away by the nearby stream but no effort has been made to erect a new one. These particular Cillins could have been chosen for monuments and plaques because they are located within high-level tourist areas, especially Dookinella, Slievemore, and Dugort 2, which can also be easily accessed and viewed. These Cillins are also located near other archaeological sites such as the Deserted Village at Slievemore, the abandoned settlement near Dugort 2, and the Holy Well near Dookinella. It's important to note that certain Cillins near abandoned settlements have been almost completely forgotten, such as the ones located in Cashel, Dooega, Salie, Ashleam 1 & 2, and Bleanaskil. It's easy to understand why these are only a vague memory because there's no one around still alive to care for these sites or remember the children located within them. Once there could have been markers associated with the sites that are in reasonable to poor condition, such

as wooden grave markers, but these have either been rotted away or overgrown.

Conclusion

From the results it can be seen that certain sites have been remembered, looked after, and remained well known by the local communities. The Cillins near abandoned settlements haven't had the same treatment, whether it is because no one is alive to remember these sites and those buried within or those who are still living have moved away from the area and are not in a position to maintain the sites. The process through which these sites have progressed from actively used sites, to sites which are no longer used but which may still be maintained or at least remembered with some detail, to sites that are only known about in an extremely vague fashion is fascinating. As time increases from the final use of these sites and as the younger part of the islands populations continues to renegotiate their relationship with the Catholic faith it seems likely that interest in and knowledge about these sites will continue to be lost. The fate of many of the Achill Cillins is therefore likely to continue along a process of turning into vague rumours and

notions, and only a small handful of the sites will continue to be maintained.

References

- Donnelly J.C. and Murphy, E.M. (2008) 'The origins of Cillini', *Archaeology Ireland*, 22(3), pp. 26–29.
- Finlay, N. (2000) 'Outside of life: Traditions of infant burial in Ireland from Cillin to Cist', *World Archaeology*, 31(3), pp. 407–422.
- Murphy, E.M. (2011) 'Children's burial grounds in Ireland (Cillini) and parental emotions toward infant death', *International Journal of Historical Archaeology*, 15(3), pp. 409–428.
- Böll's Artist Son Revisits Sites Where Achill's Unbaptized Buried (2014), *The Irish Times*. Available at: <http://www.irishtimes.com/news/environment/b%C3%B6ll-s-artist-son-revisits-sites-where-achill-s-unbaptised-buried-1.1782028>