



TENTATIVE LIST SUBMISSION FORMAT

**STATE PARTY: Ireland****Submission prepared by:****DATE OF SUBMISSION: 31 March 2010****Name:** Brian Lucas

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NAME OF PROPERTY: Western Stone Forts comprising (The Aran Islands, County Galway Group of 7 Forts, Cahercommaun, the Burren County Clare, Caherconree and Benagh, Dingle Peninsula and Staigue, Iveragh Peninsula, County Kerry).

State, Province or Region: Counties Clare, Galway and Kerry

Latitude and Longitude:

53° 7' 32.8794" North; 9° 46' 5.16" West (Dun Aonghusa, Aran),

53° 0' 52.6458" North; W9° 4' 14.016" West (Cahercommaun),

52° 12' 11" North; 9° 51' 14" West (Caherconree),

52° 6' 00" North; 9° 37' 59.9988" West (Benagh),

51° 48' 19.0008" North; 10° 0' 56.9988" West (Staigue).

DESCRIPTION:

The most common Early Medieval (700-1000AD) settlement form in Ireland was the *ringfort* – in essence an enclosed homestead or farmstead. The number of surviving examples has been estimated as *circa* 45,000. The majority are simple enclosures defined either by a single earthen bank and ditch (called *raths*) or a single drystone wall (called *cashels*). Cashels occur in stony areas throughout the country, but the majority can be found in the west of Ireland. The enclosing wall of the average cashel is usually less than 2m wide and most were probably around 2m high.

Western Stone Forts may be considered to be a subset of cashels. They represent the apogee of that settlement form, and are distinguished from the vast majority of other cashels by having one or more exceptionally thick, and high enclosing walls. As is to be expected, there is a gradation in terms of the prestige of individual sites. A survey of monuments in the western counties indicated that only fifteen or so can be considered to belong to the top echelon of western stone forts. These monuments have exceptionally massive walls (between 4 and 9m thick and up to 6m high), plus one or more

distinctive architectural features, such as terraces, steps, guard chambers or a *chevaux de frise*. Based on the evidence of archaeological excavations and of early (AD 700-900) Irish documentary sources, western stone forts can be interpreted as royal sites – i.e. they were the principal residences of the kings or sub-kings of various Early Medieval dynastic groups.

Justification of Outstanding Universal Value:

(Preliminary identification of the values of the property which merit inscription on the World Heritage List)

Western Stone Forts represent the penultimate use of a distinctive settlement form *i.e.* the drystone, generally circular, enclosure, a class of monument that was widely used by the maritime communities of the north Atlantic seaboard of Western Europe, throughout much of later prehistory.

Western Stone Forts represent the apogee of the ringfort class of monument (an enclosed farmstead occupied by an extended kin group). The distribution, character, and hierarchy of forms of ringforts provides a mirror of the organisation, economy and polity of Irish society at a particular period (AD 700-1000).

Western Stone Forts constitute an impressive corpus of vernacular architecture and represent a creative human response to the stony environment of western Ireland. Although separated in time and place from other stone fort / roundhouse traditions of Atlantic Europe, the Irish forts, nonetheless incorporate elements of an architectural repertoire peculiar to that region, in particular the *chevaux de frise* feature, murus duplex method of wall construction, and intra-mural features.

The landscape setting of these forts testifies to a way of life (tribal pastoralist) that disappeared in Ireland, and across most of Western Europe, at the beginning of the second millennium AD, to be replaced subsequently by the feudal lordships of the medieval era.

Western Stone Forts provide an exceptional opportunity for multi-disciplinary research, in particular in the rich fields of archaeology, early Irish history, and historical geography. The survival, down into the medieval era, of an economy/way of life based on cattle, rather than coinage, is not unique in a universal sense – such societies still exist, albeit on a smaller scale. As large, drystone structures, the forts *per se* are not unique. What make ‘Western Stone Forts’ of *outstanding* universal value is, the combination of well-preserved physical remains / landscape setting *and* the richness of surviving, relevant, contemporary historical texts.

The setting of Dún Aonghasa (on the Atlantic rim of Europe and at, what was at the time of its construction, the western tip of the known world), and the sheer scale of the monument, are imaginative and breathtaking.

Criteria met [see Paragraph 77 of the *Operational Guidelines*]:

(Please tick the box corresponding to the proposed criteria and justify the use of each below)

Criterion (iii): bear a unique or at least exceptional testimony to a cultural tradition or to a civilization which is living or which has disappeared.

The western stone forts, and in particular the unique concentration on the Aran Islands, may be read as a parallel text to Early Medieval documentary sources outlining the makeup of Irish society for the period AD 700-1000. The forts present a vivid material manifestation of the ‘tribal, rural, hierarchical and familial’ society (Binchy 1954, 54) described in those early written sources. In his essay ‘Tribes and Tribalism in Early Ireland’ (1971, 162), the historian F.J. Byrne suggested that, ‘*Irish history between the seventh and tenth centuries presents us with the spectacle of a tribal society being transformed by the introduction of a dynastic polity to a state wherein territorial lordship replaces hegemony over tribes as a political principle.*’ The construction of Western Stone Forts forms part of that transformation.

In Early Medieval Ireland, the church provided an outlet for the less successful, collateral branches of the main dynastic families. In the case of the Aran Islands, in particular, the resulting politico-ecclesiastical geography can also be readily translated from paper to landscape - each of the principal Aran forts is associated with a major monastic foundation.

In the context of Early Medieval, rural, Western European society, such a mirroring of archaeological and documentary texts represents an outstanding feature.

Criterion (iv): be an outstanding example of a type of building, architectural or technological ensemble or landscape which illustrates (a) significant stage(s) in human history.

The Western Stone Forts are the best surviving examples of Irish vernacular architecture down to the coming of the Normans in the twelfth century AD. Using elements of an architectural repertoire that is part native, part North Atlantic maritime tradition, they represent the Early Medieval settlement form, the ringfort, in its most sophisticated form. Ringforts, or defended farmsteads, are almost a uniquely Irish phenomenon. They provided protection against marauding cattle raiders and helped define and reinforce the hierarchies of contemporary society. Debate continues as to why so many ringforts were built within what seems to have been a relatively short time frame – a recent theory (Lynn 2006) suggests a majority might have been built in response to the spread of disease or famine in the early eighth century. Western Stone Forts represent the pinnacle of drystone, double-wall construction in Ireland (the introduction of mortar around 1000AD rendered the technique largely obsolete). The construction of the forts is a direct result of the complex network of interdependencies that is tribal society, and therefore reflects a significant stage in human history. In a landscape of stone, stone was used to define the *status quo*.

Criterion (v): be an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement, land-use, or sea-use which is representative of a culture (or cultures), or human interaction with the environment especially when it has become vulnerable under the impact of irreversible change.

The forts were the dwellings of aristocratic tribal pastoralists, the mainstay of whose economy was cattle. The low impact pastoral farming practised in the west of Ireland means that, in many cases, the territory and subsistence base of a fort or group of forts can be reconstructed. The traditional grazing regime of the Aran Islands (involving the use of lowlying pastures, with their ready access to water, for summer grazing, and the out-wintering of cattle on the higher plateaux near the southern cliffs), continues to the present day. The use of the well-watered small fields, at the foot of the limestone terraces, for agricultural cultivation, also appears to have a long history. The locations of the large stone forts – overlooking significant inter-tidal foraging areas and natural harbours – reflects what was, down to very recent times, the traditional farming/foraging subsistence base of the island community. The findings from the archaeological excavations at Dún Aonghasa and Dún Eoghanachta respectively, testify to the longevity of these traditions - at both sites, seafood and shorefood represented a very significant element of the diet of the occupants.

The stone forts on the Aran Islands were the focus of particular attention from antiquarians and scholars in the early/middle part of the nineteenth century. An outing of the British Scientific Association to the Aran Islands in 1857, organised by William Wilde (father of Oscar), and culminating in a banquet at Dún Aonghasa, was attended by most of the eminent Irish scholars of the day. These included George Petrie (described as the father of Irish Archaeology), Eugene O'Curry, curator and translator of many early Irish manuscripts, and John O'Donovan, hailed as the 'fifth master' (a reference to the *Annals of the Four Masters*, which was compiled in the early seventeenth century). Largely as a result of the interest, commentaries and concerns of these, and, other, scholars the stone forts and Early Medieval churches of the Aran Islands were among the first monuments to be vested in the newly set up Board of Works in the 1880's.

Some western stone forts, particularly the Aran Islands group, have national iconic status. Images of Dún Aonghasa are used to denote Irish/ Celtic identity, both in academic and popular contexts, across

a wide range of media.

The importance of these monuments in a national sense is also acknowledged by the following:

- They are afforded protection under the various National Monuments Acts 1934-2000; all are either in the ownership, or guardianship of the State, except for Benagh.
- The monuments are listed in regional surveys.
- They have been the subject of considerable recent investment (Discovery Programme; The Western Stone Forts Project) from a research perspective. As part of that project, large scale surveys have been carried out at the most prestigious forts and archaeological excavations have been carried out at two sites. The findings from the excavations at Dún Aonghasa, in particular, are of wide ranging significance for the study of fortifications (prehistoric and historic) nationally.

Following on from the excavations, visitor facilities, including an interpretive centre and all year round guides/curators, have been installed at Dún Aonghasa. A viewing platform has been built at Cahercommaun and information panels are currently being erected at the fort, and at the base of the plateau.

In addition to their intrinsic value, the forts provide a key to understanding people's attitude to the past at a particular point in time. By refurbishing, or reclaiming, a place of ancestral significance, (the Late Bronze Age hillfort built *circa* 1000BC in the case of Dún Aonghasa; the Neolithic/Early Bronze Age ritual landscape with its megalithic tomb cemeteries and burial cairns in the case of Cahercommaun; an earlier fortified promontory in the case of Dún Beag), the fort builders were 'appropriating antiquity.' This is a well-recognised aspect of Irish Early Medieval cultural tradition. It is also an international phenomenon, occurring at various times, and in a variety of forms, among different cultures.

Statements of authenticity and/or integrity [see Paragraphs 78-95 of the *Operational*

Guidelines]:

Authenticity:

The authenticity of the forts (their form, design, materials, substance, location and setting) is validated by a wealth of archaeological and historical research conducted over the last two hundred years, or so. In recent times, in depth research has been carried out as part of the *Western Stone Forts Project*, under the auspices of the state-funded Discovery Programme. The results of that study (Cotter forthcoming) are due to be published as a two volume monograph in 2010. The project focussed on examining the cultural context of the Irish forts, and on comparative studies with other stone forts in Western Europe. Detailed instrument and photographic surveys were conducted of the most important Irish sites (this included the seven Aran forts, Caherconree and Benagh) and archaeological excavations were carried out at Dún Aonghasa and Dún Eoghanachta. Altogether about twenty different specialist reports were commissioned in the course of those excavations. The results greatly expand our knowledge of the chronology, origins and development, function and demise of the forts. Parallel historical research has helped to expand the explanatory framework and throw light on their overall cultural context. Ongoing landscape studies in the Burren and elsewhere are also helping to build up a picture of the broader environmental background. Contributions by European scholars have also advanced understanding of the different origins of morphologically similar fort types along the Atlantic seaboard of Western Europe.

The Western Stone Forts Project examined the restoration history of the forts (see below) and their historical authenticity can be verified.

The Aran Forts

All seven Aran forts were restored in the period 1884-1885. In the absence of official records, assessment of the impact of those works depends very much on comparing pre-restoration accounts,

drawings, photos etc. with existing features. Following this type of analysis for the Aran forts, it appears that the 1884-85 works were largely confined to reinstating fallen sections of walling, constructing buttresses etc. The physical integrity and the testimonial value of the forts have therefore not been compromised. Clearance of the interiors at some of the forts may have had an impact on the preservation of the archaeological record. Dún Formna was remodelled as a castle bawn during the medieval period; only excavation could indicate to what extent this has impacted on the earlier settlement.

Cahercommaun, Caherconree, Benagh and Staigue

As part of ongoing maintenance, some repairs have been carried out from time to time at Cahercommaun and Staigue. Subsequent to the 1934 excavations, the entrance to the inner enclosure at Cahercommaun was blocked up in order to protect the houses and other structures in the interior. This blocking wall remains in place, but, a raised platform now allows a view of the interior. The maintenance repairs at Staigue appear to have been of a relatively minor nature. No refurbishments or repairs have been carried out at Benagh. There is no official record of any conservation works at Caherconree. Some minor alterations (e.g. the creation of a second entrance in the inner wall; the construction of sheep pens in areas of wall collapse) postdate the abandonment of the fort.

Integrity:

The visual integrity of all of the above forts remains intact and their settings retain a good deal of the original landscape character. The traditional farming regime on the Aran Islands and on the high Burren, and the commonage system practised in the mountainous regions of Kerry have protected the settings from developments associated with intensive farming, or industry. This low impact farming has also helped to preserve other elements of the Early Medieval landscape.

Comparison with other similar properties:

(The comparison should outline similarities with other properties on the World Heritage List or not, and the reasons that make the property stand out)

Ireland

Based on the evidence of archaeological excavations and of early (AD 700-900) documentary sources, Western Stone Forts can be considered to have been royal sites – i.e. the principal residences of kings or sub-kings of dynastic groups. Other contemporary monuments in Ireland, which had a similar function, are prestigious raths and crannogs (island fortresses). Some of the latter (e.g. Doon or O’Boyle’s Fort, Co. Donegal) are included in the category of western stone forts.

Western Stone Forts borrowed elements from Iron Age fortifications in the North Atlantic realm. The *chevaux de frise* feature is most commonly found in Iron Age, Spanish and Portuguese castros. The wall chamber, as it occurs in Irish forts, borrows from the souterrain tradition (souterrain = an underground passage, with or without chambers, which becomes very common in Irish ringforts from *circa* the ninth century onwards), and the tradition of hollow wall construction (a technique common in the broch architecture of Atlantic Scotland). Aspects such as the *murus duplex* type wall construction are typical of Late Iron Age drystone fortifications in other parts of Western Europe.

Scotland

Outside Ireland, the closest comparable monuments to Western Stone Forts are undoubtedly the royal centres of the Scotti (Irish) in the Scottish kingdom of Dal Riata (historic Argyll), especially forts such as Dunadd (Lane and Campbell 2000) and Dunollie (Alcock and Alcock 1987). Extensive excavations at Dunadd (Lane and Campbell 2000) showed that monument to have evolved over time from a small, summit ‘dun’ in the fourth/fifth century AD to a much larger nuclear fort by the eight/ninth century AD. In the later period, the fort was an important redistribution centre for luxury commodities, a trade that seems to have been under royal control. Evidence for inauguration of the kings of Dal Riata on the site was also strengthened by the excavation findings.

Listed World Heritage Sites

Palace cities, fortresses and fortified landscapes all feature on the existing World Heritage List.

Listed European fortresses include late prehistoric examples (e.g. No. 906: the late Iron Age Dacian fortresses, Romania; No. 968: the late Iron Age fortresses or defended villages on the Baltic island of Öland, Sweden), pre-Christian examples (No. 1137: the Kernavė Archaeological site, Lithuania), and others, whose character is largely medieval, (e.g. No.826: the hilltop fortresses of the eastern Ligurian Riviera, Italy.). Iron Age *castros* also feature as a backdrop to the gold mining industrial landscape of the Las Médulas region of northwest Spain (No. 803). Some of the above monuments are superficially similar to Irish Western Stone Forts in that they are of drystone construction, have ‘clan’ origins, and (in some cases, at least) have evolved over long periods of time. The main period(s) of use of most either predates, or postdates the Irish examples, however. The concentration of seven very large forts on the Aran Islands (a relatively small land mass), while not unique, is an exceptional, and exceptionally well-preserved, grouping of monuments that retain their Early Medieval character.

Outside Europe, outstanding examples of tribal forts include the immense fort of unbaked bricks at the Oasis of Bahla, Oman (No. 433). The fort, considered an exceptional example of its type, bears testimony to the power of the dominant tribe in the area, the Banu Nebhan, between the twelfth and fifteenth centuries AD. Great Zimbabwe (No. 364) is of comparable date and testifies to the might of the Bantu civilization of the Shona between the 11th and 15th centuries AD.

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The Tentative List submission format is available from the UNESCO World Heritage Centre and at the following Web address: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists>

- Further guidance on the preparation of Tentative Lists can be found in Paragraphs 62-67 of the *Operational Guidelines*.
- An example of a completed Tentative List submission format can be found at the following Web address: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists>
- All Tentative Lists submitted by States Parties are available at the following Web address: <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists>
- The original signed version of the completed Tentative List submission format should be sent in English or French to: UNESCO World Heritage Centre, 7 place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France
- States Parties are encouraged to also submit this information in electronic format (diskette or CD-Rom) or by e-mail to wh-tentativelists@unesco.org