

## The O'Davoren Brehon Law School and its Landscape, Burren, County Clare

This project, based in the Department of Archaeology, NUI, Galway, explores the archaeology and landscape of the estate lands held by the Uí Dhábhoireann hereditary legal family in the Ó Lochlainn lordship of Boireann. It has been conceived as the principal case study in a longterm research programme on *Estates of Irish Hereditary Legal Families*, which investigates the lands and settlements of families who practised brehon law, compiled and transmitted law texts and kept schools in the classical Gaelic tradition between c.1300 and c.1650.

Dub-da-bairenn ('Black of the two rocky places or rocky deserts'), from whom derives the surname Ó Dábhoireann, is cited as *rí Muman* in the pre-Norman genealogies of the kings of Munster in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster. The two Burrens in question can perhaps be identified as the respective lordships and later seventeenth-century baronies of Burren and Corcomroe that together originally constituted the eastern and western regions of the *mór túath* of Corca Modhruadh. The earliest chronicle reference to an Ó Dábhoireann *ollamh* in brehon law of Corca Modhruadh occurs for the year 1364, in the Annals of Connacht, but the sept name confirms a much earlier Ó Dábhoireann presence in the Burren region.

The Uí Dhábhoireann are well represented in documentary records. The marginalia of MS Egerton 88, a legal glossary compiled by Domnall Ó Dábhoireann and his pupils between 1564 and 1569, bears testimony to the existence of a law school on the Cahermacnaghten lands of the Uí Dhábhoireann estate and to the relationship it enjoyed with the Mac Aodhagáin *sgoilteagh* at Park in east Galway. Seventeenth-century administrative records, such as the Earl of Thomond rental of 1626, indicate the land-holding status of the family in that period, and the 1659 census reveals that Giolla na naomh óg Ó Dábhoireann and thirteen Irish still inhabited Cahermacnaghten at that time. But it is a deed of land division dated 1606 (more generally known as the Corofin MS) that is of greatest use to the field archaeologist in reconstructing the Uí Dhábhoireann estate lands. It provides topographical, place-name and settlement details, many of which can be identified on the ground.

In 1606 the Uí Dhábhoireann estate constituted two *sessiagh* (the basic unit of Gaelic land division in the Burren was the *sessiagh* and *leath sessiagh*) which included the three *leath sessiagh* of Cahermacnaghten, Lismacteige, and Kilcolmanbarry, and two quarter *sessiagh* at Lisduane and Lisnalogherne. The land division deed of 1606 distinguishes Cahermacnaghten as the core of the estate and the cashel of Cahermacnaghten is referred to as the *ceann áit* or head place of the family.

Two seasons of walkover survey in 2005 and 2006 have been conducted in order to produce a GIS map of the upstanding archaeology on the 734-acre Cahermacnaghten land-holding of the Uí Dhábhoireann, and to compile a record of each site and monument encountered. Descriptions of land-use and topography were also included in order to produce a micro-geography of the estate lands. Two other important objectives of the survey were to determine how Cahermacnaghten was traversed and its primary settlements reached, and to try to identify on the ground some of the places noted in the deed of land division 1606.

During the course of the survey, approximately ninety upstanding sites and features were catalogued, many of which are new to the archaeological record. Three settlement nuclei have been identified as primary. There are two cashels – Cathair Uí Dhúilín in the eastern part of the *leath sessaigh* and Cathair Mic Neachtain (the *ceann áit* and residence of the Uí Dhábhoireann) at its approximate centre. Cabhail Tí Breac, an exceptional building that is either the late medieval law school of Domnall Ó Dábhoireann or a house of the period, lies at the southwest end of the townland. Extensive field-systems, animal folds, house sites, gardens, and kilns, representing farming activity, are tightly clustered around the three primary settlements. Further archaeological investigation is planned to try to establish a chronology for some of those agriculture features and house sites. One of the significant discoveries of the project is the identification of the original route through Cahermacnaghten – a narrow, shallow, flat-bottomed valley which cuts diagonally across the northeast–southwest axis of the townland. This not only linked the main settlement nuclei in the pre-modern period, but with its rich depth of soil in an area of otherwise thin soil cover, it formed an important agricultural spine for the *leath sessiagh* of Cahermacnaghten on the Uí Dhábhoireann estate.

The project gratefully acknowledges the Royal Irish Academy for funding survey and GIS at Cahermacnaghten.

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### Photos and captions



*Cabhail Tí Breac* – late medieval house or law school of the Uí Dhábhoireann



Recording house site 2 at *Cabhail Tí Breac*



Recording field walls in the valley below the cashel residence of *Cathair Mic Neachtain*