

CAHER MACNAGHTEN

IN THE BARONY OF BURREN, COUNTY CLARE, WESTERN EIRE

By **James Macnaughton**

A “Caher”(Cathair, Cashel) is an ancient stone-built Ring Fort of which there are around 40,000 examples scattered throughout Ireland, but mainly in the North and West. They were built during the Iron Age (800BC – 400AD) and served as protective forts for a small community and its livestock during “hit and run” raids by cattle thieves – like the Scottish Brochs. The more elaborate the walls and banks, the higher the status of the occupants, and some had links with nobility or Kingship. They were also used as a home for a freeman and his family – possibly for industrial purposes – for example pottery trading.



Caher Macnaghten, two miles from Noughavel, is reasonably well preserved, having been constructed from big limestone blocks. It has immensely thick walls – 10 feet wide and stands 20 feet tall. Not far away is Mullaghmore, a mountain used for ritual purposes where everyone gathered to celebrate Lammas, Hallowe’en, St. Brigid’s Day and Mayday (Lughnasa, Samhain, Imbolc and Bealtaine).

So far, so interesting, but the fascinating factor is the name of this particular Ring Fort in the Burren – Caher **Macnaghten**. We are familiar with the Macnaghtens of County

Antrim – our present Clan Chief, Sir Malcolm F. Macnaghten is of that ilk – who went over from the Mull of Kintyre around 1580 with Shane Dubh, but not only is the Burren in County Clare in Eire a long way to the South West of Antrim, but Caher Macnaghten was built between 800BC and 400AD, a thousand years before Shane Dubh's arrival, so what branch of our Clan are we talking about here? There was an important Clan called O'Nechtán in Connaught whose roots go back a long way, but is it feasible that some of those O'Nechtáns called themselves Macnaghten? My researches so far have not been able to throw any light on this, but maybe some of you will find the solution!

Caher Macnaghten was not just a fortified stone Ring Fort, but from 1509 for several centuries it was the site of an important Law School, so its name was known far and wide. A family called O' Dávoran, a sept of the Eoganacht, one of the Royal families of Munster, acquired land in the Barony of Burren and founded at Caher Macnaghten a Law School devoted to the study of the ancient Laws of Ireland. These were the Brehon Laws, which had been in existence for 1,000 years before St. Patrick arrived in 432AD and began to change them to fit in with Christian precepts. The "Brehons" were the judges who had to undergo a very lengthy course of study and training to qualify. There were laws of property – dealing with theft, damage, inheritance: Laws pertaining to Children: Laws of Livestock; Laws of Marriage and Divorce – the main tract on Marriage and the Rights of Women showed that they had achieved extensive privileges of a liberal nature. However, when English Law was eventually introduced here, the status of women was again demeaned and some rights accepted in the 10th Century were not fully recovered until the 20th: Laws of injury to persons – disabling, wounding and killing. Any man who injured a neighbour was liable, not only for a fine, but was held responsible for nursing the wounded party back to health. There was no death penalty for murder, but the guilty person had to pay recompense in cash or in kind to the family of the deceased. The killing of a near relative – father/mother, sister/son was adjudged to be the worst crime of all. The Brehon himself/herself was liable for damages if he/she delivered a false or unjust judgment. The Brehons had collections of laws in volumes or tracts – the most important are the Senchus Mór and the Book of Acaill.

It is obvious that the Irish civilisation based on these very wise Laws was far ahead of that in England, yet the English conquerors condemned this far-sighted system and enforced their much inferior Laws. However, the mystery behind the naming of Caher Macnaghten remains. Which of you is going to solve it?

Sources:

- www.caraharrison.com/mylady_judge/the prologue.htm
- www.nuigalway.ie/archeology/Research/Burren_Landscape_Through_Time
- en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ringfort

This work is © copyrighted and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any medium without the written permission of the author, James Macnaughton, Southfield House 11, Heather Bank, Paddock Wood, Tonbridge, UK – TN12 6BW, 12 July 2012.