

Brief

## **(i) Clare Island: lost Civilisations (ii) and the Pirate Queen**

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([www.sciencespin.com/magazine/archive/2008/11/clare-island-the-lost-civilisations/](http://www.sciencespin.com/magazine/archive/2008/11/clare-island-the-lost-civilisations/) -Anthony King)

#### **Mediaeval Times and the O'Malley Clan**

Scientific data gathered by new surveys of Clare Island has helped researchers to develop a better picture of the early settlement of the island, from prehistoric times.



Clare Island is a rugged, inhabited island, off the coast of Mayo. Above, the island as seen from the ferry – showing the central mountain (an Cnoc mór)



The island was once the home of the legendary pirate queen, Grace O'Malley. [Photo Credit: Royal Irish Academy]

The mediæval inhabitants of Clare Island lived within the realm of the O'Malley Clan. Grace O'Malley was a leader, who ruled the seas, around the west coast. Hers was a rich Gaelic world – with its monks, musicians and loyal clansmen.

The island has, however, a far earlier megalithic culture. The megalithic islanders, archaeologists think, would have lived in rectangular timber houses, grown cereals and raised cattle, sheep, and goats. Research is providing insights into ancient island life.



**Watchtower built by the English during Napoleonic times.**

## **The Cistercian Abbey**

The abbey on Clare Island dates from the mediæval period. Its construction reveals much about Gaelic society at the time. The paintings, which adorn walls and ceilings, portray monks, musicians, knights and hunters and their prey. These works record a time when the rule of Gaelic lords was coming to an end. The images were made in a sacred place, in the hopes that they would survive, to tell us their story.



The abbey was important: it was a family chapel of the O'Malley Clan. Legend has it that, for a period, Grace had her headquarters on Clare Island. The ornately painted abbey is situated on a rise, a mile or so from the island's main harbour and one of Grace's half-dozen castles. Mediæval families, both Gaelic and Norman, were patrons of the Church.



Today, the chapel has probably the most intact mediæval ceiling in the country. "It is of national and arguably international importance." said **Dr Paul Gosling**, an archaeologist and editor of the **Royal Irish Academy's** recent volume on the abbey.

The ruined tower houses and castles around the country were not always so grey. In fact, the mediæval world shone with colour and buildings were festooned with paintings and tapestry. Few wall murals survived Ireland's tortuous history. Little enough of anything survived it.



Dr Gosling said the abbey paintings are particularly important: they offer a Gaelic worldview: "Most mediæval paintings, which survive in Ireland, would be in the eastern part of the country and would tend to be more Anglo-Norman (Old English), whereas these are patently late mediæval Gaelic paintings." The nature of the art is quite rustic, insular and derivative. "You get a Gaelic world view on that ceiling, of the pastimes of a seafaring, partially mercantile family, but very much a family based in Gaelic law, traditions and family organisation and politics."

Across from a Gothic, walled tomb in the abbey, visitors can see the plaque of the O'Malley heraldic arms. The limestone slab depicts a hunted boar along with a ship and a horse, at full gallop. The ship represents the Clan's maritime activities. These included trade, levying

taxes on English merchant vessels and raids on competitors. In 1513, for example, the O'Malley fleet attacked the town of Killybegs. The Clan's motto on the plaque reads: 'Terra marique potens', meaning 'Powerful on sea and land'.

According to the New Survey of Clare Island (RIA, 1991), the boar may recall a competitive test, in early Irish texts, when candidates for kingship must hunt a wild animal: the man who captured the quarry became the new ruler.

The abbey was built and granted to the Cistercian order sometime after 1224, with a two-storey chancel added in the 15<sup>th</sup> century. "It's a most peculiar structure; effectively a small parish-like building, with a chancel added." said Dr Gosling.

That the Cistercians ran this abbey was unorthodox. The ethos of their order is to withdraw from the world and live in rural areas. It has been seen as unusual that the monks stayed on the island, where they provided parochial and pastoral care. "It makes the whole thing quite intriguing", says Dr Gosling, "but the Cistercians did do some unusual things in Ireland and may have gone native". On the other hand, their work for the little island community does not need to be deprecated but is to be balanced by the utter isolation of the location.

The discovery, in 1992, of a mounted warrior on the church wall has again been taken to show how far the abbey strayed from monastic ideals. In the Abbey Volume, of the New Clare Island Survey, mediæval art expert Dr Roger Staley writes that the abbey is more a celebration of lordly power than of Cistercian spirituality. He points to the image of the mounted knight, with his mailed armour, as a common embodiment of aristocratic authority, in mediæval art. As pointed out above, however, these decorations were recording the life of the Gael, soon to end in destruction. Spirituality can indeed find a home in uncensored art and in the absence of regulation. It is always the intention behind the act which determines its spiritual nature, given that that is understood by the people concerned.

## **Grace O'Malley's Castle**



The O'Malley wealth and influence were tied to their lightly built galleys, which allowed them to trade, exact taxes and carry out raids. Clare Island's harbour offered an ideal naval base from which to police and harass the coastal traffic around Clew Bay. Grace O'Malley's island castle, probably built in the sixteenth century, guarded the harbour - it still stands. Though named for her, whether the Pirate Queen ever stayed in the castle is said to be uncertain. Gráinne Uí Mháille (not Ní Mháille, in local speech) was not a chieftain. She is not mentioned in any Gaelic sources. She exists only in English writings, where she appears in a negative light. Her legacy lies with the people. She was a figure of hope, from a time when hope was in short supply.



It was indeed her defiance of England which most probably elevated her to the status of Gaelic heroine. Her memory was particularly underlined, in the 18th century, when the Gaelic way of life was finally being wiped out. Her abilities as a leader of fighting men and as a seafarer became part of folklore. She undoubtedly visited Clare Island, but discerning between the legends, truths and fictions, which surround Gráinne, is difficult for fact-tied historians. In all likelihood, however, she used all the O'Malley castles, as her fortunes dictated. They were built in strategic places. The abbey certainly shows the importance of the island residence.

## **The Bronze Age**



That the island was occupied long before the O'Malley's is evidenced by the prodigious number of mysterious Bronze Age mounds. Fifty-three of these 'fulachtaí fia' are known on the island. Four have been excavated. Unearthed from the mounds were piles of heat-shattered stones and wattle troughs. Two were radiocarbon dated to 2,000 B.C.. Two were dated to around 1,000 B.C.. Whatever they were used for continued for a millennium.

"Fifty-three doesn't indicate a large population," said Dr Gosling, "but a long line of centuries where there was continuous settlement and cultural uniformity."

Meanwhile, Professor John Waddell, an expert in prehistory at NUI Galway, said it remains a mystery why hot stones were used to heat troughs of water, but the 'fulachtaí fia' possibly had a range of functions. Archaeologists have surmised that these included boiling venison, bathing and fermenting wild yeast to make beer.

Dr Gosling sees sauna-bathing as most likely. "It is difficult to believe they were effective cooking places," he said, "as you'd need to boil about 100 gallons of water in these troughs and large amounts of meat. But why would people go to so much trouble to heat water?" Sauna is an integral component of cultural life in Nordic countries. It may be that Ireland had cultural traditions in which washing and bathing were done as part of ritual activity. He said it could be part of Bronze Age rites of passage, marriage, or linked to religious observance.

If tradition has force, the word 'fulacht' means a 'cooking place'. 'Fulacht fianasa' is a 'warrior band's cooking place'. 'Ag fulacht draoidheachta' means 'concocting charms'. 'Fulachtóir' means a 'cook' (An Duinníneach).

Thomas Westropp wrote the archaeology paper, in 1912, for the original Clare Island Survey. He was the leading field archaeologist of his day. He was somewhat disappointed with what

he found on the island. It does not have as well defined promontory forts. There are no ring forts. The church paintings were the main subjects of study.

"It has a ruined castle, a ruined signal tower, a lighthouse, a small church and graveyard, a scattering of huts and houses, a number of enclosures and a megalithic tomb." said Dr Gosling. "If you take the abbey out," he said, "nearly everything is typical." However, Dr Gosling sees a wider significance. "From the point of view of the Clare Island survey, it's absolutely brilliant. The data on Clare Island can be used to draw conclusions on the character of Irish settlement from prehistoric right down to modern times."

### **The Megalithic Tomb**



From the island's harbour you will see signposts to a megalithic tomb. This dates from 4,000 to 3,000 B.C.. It is a court tomb, the earliest type of megalithic tomb in Ireland. They are common along the Mayo/Sligo coast. These tombs had a roofless courtyard area and a compartmentalised burial chamber. Professor Waddell explains that ancient ritual practices were performed in the courtyard: the tomb acted as the ceremonial centre, for the small agricultural community. The island's farmers would have lived in rectangular timber houses, grew cereals like wheat and barley and raised cattle, sheep and goats.

The tomb suggests that Clare Island had a settled farming community, as early as 4th millennium B.C. There are no archaeological monuments dated between 3,000 and 2,100 B.C.. However, archaeologists are unsure as to whether the island has been continuously inhabited. There are also few remains from the first millennium and from the early Christian period. "This doesn't mean they weren't there. The building of the abbey might have removed an earlier foundation." said Prof Waddell. A standing stone and holy well close by the abbey suggests it was a place of worship before medieval times.

**(ii) Gráinne Uí Mháille, the Pirate Queen:  
she was a loyal and loving noblewoman and  
she rose to every challenge with courage and style.**

Gráinne was born in 1530 at Clare Island Castle, County Mayo, Ireland. She was a wife and mother, a pirate, a leader and a woman who survived all that the English invader could throw at her, in the closing days of Gaelic civilisation.

Her father, Eoin 'Dubhdarra' (black oak) Ó Máille, was chieftain of the Barony of Murrish and of sea-faring stock since before Norman times. The trade routes led to Spain and to Scotland, which at that time was still part of the Gaeltacht (or Gaelic Homeland). The family motto was 'Terra Mariq Potens' (Powerful on Land and Sea.)

It was always Gráinne's dream to take up the family tradition and go to sea. She lived in a family castle. Her mother wanted her to follow more genteel ways and she was taught to read Latin. Grace persevered in her intentions, beseeching her father to bring her by sea to Spain. Her mother's wishes prevailed. To express her upset, she cut off her beautiful hair and put on boy's clothing. Thus, she earned the name 'Gráinne Mhaol' (bald Gráinne) and she was allowed to sail from Ireland for Spain.

Granuaile, an anglicisation of Gráinne Uí Mháille', became well accustomed to the sea in her young years. During an attack from an English ship, she climbed the rigging. She was so positioned that when her father below was attacked from the rear, that she could jump down on land on the attacking Englishman. His advantage was thus overturned.

In 1546, at sixteen years of age, Grace was married to Dónal Ó Flathartaigh. As in noble houses everywhere in Europe, at that time, marriages were often arranged. Dónal was the Táiniste, ie second only to An Flaithhearteach, ('the O'Flaherty'), head of the powerful O'Flaherty Clan and chieftain of all Iar-Chonnacht (West Connacht). Gráinne's natural leadership abilities came to the fore, as time progressed, and she not only fished and traded but became involved in the everyday life of her people, dealing with legal and political issues and doing so well. She effectively took over the running of the family fleet.

The English and anglicised Merchants of Galway, then a European hub of trade, decided to cut off the Ó Flathartaigh Clan from the markets for the primary products which they produced. Gráinne exacted a price for this behaviour, her fast pirate ships well able to catch and impede the traders. Their captains would have the choice of paying a toll or being relieved of their cargo.

The English suffered defeat at the hands of another chieftain of the Clan in the 1560s. He successfully took on the English Earl of Clanrickard, near Galway City. The English lacked resources to carry out a major offensive. They sued for peace. They offered the young chieftain a settlement whereby he would ensure English possessions were safe. In return, the English would recognise him as 'An Flathartaigh' - chieftain of all Iar-Connacht, in effect weakening the position of Gráinne's husband.

Dónal Ó Flathartaigh died soon afterwards in internecine strife. His widow, Gráinne, was not given the one-third of her husband's estate. She had to return to the Ó Máille lands, leaving her children behind her, to protect their inheritance. Lineage was all-important in Gaelic law.

Gráinne, now in her thirties, took up residence on Cliara (Clare Island in Clew Bay), and once more engaged very profitably both from the guarantee of safe passage to Merchants working out of Galway and from piracy. She grew powerful again and had five castles along the coast.

To maintain her economic strength against the ever-encroaching powers of England, she thought to make a new alliance. Gráinne went to the door of Castle Rockfleet and proposed marriage to Richard Burke. He was convinced of the plan and she must surely have known her man. She bore him a son and they were married for seventeen years, when she was again widowed.

Times were increasingly difficult for Gráinne, as English law gradually spread and Gaelic title to land was inexorably extinguished. Minor Gaelic nobles succumbed to English threats and force. If they did not, they were removed. Gráinne held her ground and adhered to the Gaelic laws and practices she had always known.

The English appointed one Richard Bingham as Governor to Connacht. His aim was to introduce the English writ into a land about which he nothing. He captured Gráinne, now 56 years of age. It was his plan to hang her. She did not surrender and was only saved when her son-in-law put himself under Bingham's control. Her wealth in cattle and land was taken. Her fleet too was removed and she fell into want.

All around her, the subduing of Connacht continued. This was a quiet war but it was bloody, lasting over thirty years. Richard Bingham arrested her son Tibbot (Irish for Theobald) and her brother Dónal-na-bPíopaí (Dónal of the Pipes - a Musician) in 1593. He still feared the poverty-stricken Gráinne and sought to control her in this way.

Gráinne took recourse to Queen, Elizabeth I, to make a case for the freeing of the men and the return of her assets. Forcefully to press her request, she set sail to London. She could have expected the Tower of London and execution but by this time, in 1593, the proud woman had nothing to lose.

Elizabeth saw Gráinne - perhaps out of respect for the woman about whom she had heard so much. In a man's world, the two women conversed in Latin.

Queen Elizabeth agreed to Gráinne's terms: the release of her family in return for naval service at sea. She ordered Bingham to free the captives and restore Gráinne's wealth and possessions. He, however, was far from London, and was pleased to keep Gráinne side-lined.

Gráinne died in her early seventies, around 1603, at Rockfleet castle. In her lifetime she maintained the practices and principles of Gaelic civilisation, importantly our Brehon Laws. Like many good women, she must survive adversity. She lives on in folk memories, as the most magnificent of women, who remained loyal to the people. She did not flee.

[At times, certain writers may offer poor surmise to replace scholarly examination of the oral tradition – the best source of information on Gráinne Uí Mháille.]

[www.essortment.com/grace-omalley-irish-pirate-21549.html](http://www.essortment.com/grace-omalley-irish-pirate-21549.html)