

Excavations in the gatehouse of Nenagh Castle, 1996 and 1997

By Brian J. Hodkinson

1. Introduction

Excavations within the gatehouse complex of the castle were carried out over a six-week period in September and October 1996 with a shorter second season in September 1997. Both seasons were funded by the Department of Arts, Heritage, Gaeltacht and the Islands and directed by the writer. The following report is an edited version of a full archive report lodged with the Department.

2. Description of the standing buildings

The gatehouse complex consists of two main phases, a simple twin towered gatehouse of early 13th century date with a rectangular hall block added across the backs of the towers, probably in the latter part of the 13th century. (Fig. 1.)

2.1 Phase 1.

The gatehouse was originally approached from the south across what is now the back-yard of O'Connor's Hypermarket. The eastern tower is reasonably intact up to first floor level, but the western tower is largely absent with only the back wall surviving to any height. It is possible that other parts of the west tower survive within or under buildings belonging to the hypermarket. An undated drawing, probably of late 18th or early 19th century date, shows the gatehouse standing to full height. (Fig. 2.)

The eastern tower is D-shaped in plan with a circular chamber at ground floor level containing a domed vault. The chamber is lit by two disfigured opes, both set within embrasures. One of these opes faces towards Pearse Street, while the other commands the approach to the front of the drawbridge pit. Although disfigured it can be assumed, by analogy with the great tower or keep, that both embrasures contained plunging loops. The tower has an external base batter which is identifiable from the eastern curtain round to the front of the drawbridge pit, though for most of its length only a few stones survive to indicate its presence. In the area in front of the drawbridge pit the batter has been largely removed, with only the lower stones surviving, and it appears that the wall core itself has been quarried away in part, which may account for the large crack running roughly east-west through the tower. The tower is entered by a doorway set in the angle with the east curtain, and scarring within the doorway indicates that the present floor level of both the entrance passage and inside is some 40cm lower than the original level. It is assumed that there was an earth floor within.

The east curtain is no longer extant except for a very short length of the external face (less than 40cm) above and slightly east of the door into the tower, with a newly excavated section directly below it. Allowing for a reasonable thickness of wall, one has to assume that the tower was not entered directly off the courtyard and the passage turned within the curtain. This short

length of passage could have included a loop to protect the angle between tower and curtain. East of the curtain it is possible to see the raggle of another narrow vertical wall, extending upwards from the base batter. The curve of the tower seems to flatten from this second wall into the curtain, a distance of c. 1.5m. This arrangement is suggestive of a corner projection and given that it extends down to the base batter, it is unlikely to have been a machicolation protecting the corner angle. The best interpretation is that it is a latrine shaft, from the first and/or second floor of the tower, emptying to the outside of the castle. The vault within the tower seems to be a later addition resting in a channel gouged around the wall. In some places the springing stones sit forward of the wall while in others they are inside the channel, an unevenness which would not be found had it been part of the original build.

At first floor level little original detail now survives. There are remains of the offset course to take the original wooden floor and part of one side of an embrasure looking straight out to the south. On the west side there are the remains of the lower part of the springing over the gate passage with the top of the portcullis slot at the inner end of the passage. On the surviving top level of the back of the tower there are a few stones which may be remains of steps, rising from the inside of the tower. If these are part of the original build then they are probably leading to a mural passage and the garderobe, but if they are part of the later phase then they would have given directly on to the hall.

The eastern tower was reduced in height in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century, in places to just above the first floor offset level, elsewhere to below that level. Where the tower wall was below the level, the inner edge has been raised back up to floor level and the outer edge had a narrower wall built up to give the impression from below of a uniformly level tower. It is by no means clear if the vault in the chamber below was added at this time, or whether the tower was deliberately lowered to its level. Whichever, the upper side of the vault now became the conical roof of the chamber, with a gulley running around the inside of the tower walls. This gulley and the areas of wall which had been built up were deliberately sealed with what appears to be some kind of puddled clay with a lime coating. The tower wall areas were designed to drain into the gulley and the gulley has a built-in fall to a square hole through the tower wall which discharges to the front of the entrance passage. The conical vault was itself sealed with clay and a slate roof put directly onto the clay, with nails sticking into the clay. (Fig. 3.)

It is assumed that the western tower was a mirror image of the first, except that the ground floor entrance is concealed behind blocking at the centre of the back wall, and the first floor level was not equipped with a garderobe. At the rear of both of the towers there are extremely short remains of narrow walls flanking the central passage. These seem to be integral with the build of the towers, but because all the cross walls etc., within the hall area are absent it not clear how far these returns ran. The later hall block must have had flanking walls to the passageway, but had the returns in question belonged to that building, one might have expected a butt joint or at least more obvious evidence that they were added. It is therefore suggested that these walls simply lengthened the passage for an unknown distance, in a manner similar to the back projections at King John's Castle, Limerick or Dunamase, Co. Laois, and that these were subsequently lengthened again when the hall block was added. There is some support for this interpretation from the excavated evidence.

The passageway between the towers had an arch at both front and rear, but only the rear one survives as a full span. The remains of a portcullis slot, carried out in sandstone, are visible on the east tower immediately in front of the rear arch, on the east tower. Between the portcullis slot and front arch on the east side are the remains of the vaulting over the passage. This

vaulting is centred separately to the front arch and it is not inconceivable that it is a secondary feature and that the original arrangement was planking, as in the gatehouse at Dunamase.

Within the passage are the remains of a two-slot drawbridge pit, with a central stone spine wall and stone walls closing off the front and rear. It is clear from the offset between the jamb of the rear arch and the side-wall of this pit that the original road level was well over 1m higher than the highest surviving point of the rear, spine and front walls. The front wall is battered on the outside and is set slightly forward of the front arch, to allow the bridge to close against the outer face of the arch. Neither of the pivot stones survives. The bases of the slots are cut in to subsoil and slope markedly down from the rear wall to allow for the swing of the counterweight arms. There is what seems to be a drain hole through the front wall on the west side and there was probably a similar arrangement on the eastern side, but this has been disturbed by a modern gas pipe, which cut through the wall at this point.

A short section of the west curtain survives to the west of the later hall block. It terminates at a face which can only be interpreted as one side of a ground level embrasure. The facing does not continue through to the outer face of the wall and there is just a hint of the springing of an arch over the rear of the embrasure. The curtain meets the back of the west tower at an angle and the west wall of the later hall block runs to the same point. In the angle formed by the curtain and the outside of the hall block, and just east of the embrasure, is a short length of walling which runs in at an angle behind the face of the hall block. This wall, which rises at least to wall-walk level, is set at right angles to the curtain and is bonded with it, and so is contemporary. Confirmation is to be seen in the same corner where all wall foundations are visible, and the hall has a foundation cut from a distinctly higher level than that shared by the curtain and the wall at right angles.

The wall seems to be part of a building that ran along the inside of the west curtain and which was replaced when the phase 2 hall was added to the gatehouse. There is no trace of a return in the excavated area, nor scarring of roof or floor lines on the backs of the gatehouse towers, to suggest that the wall ever turned eastwards. At the junction of the wall with the curtain, just west of the western gate-tower, are the remains of a garderobe chute, which seem to be part of the original build. This seems to have served the building along the inside of the wall and to have been accessible at wall walk level. It was adapted in the second phase of building.

2.2. Phase 2.

The hall block is a two storey rectangular building set across the back of the gatehouse, using the pre-existing structures as its fourth side. The east wall is absent except at the north-east corner, where a short section survives as an overhang at first floor level. Also at this corner on the outside of the wall is a short section of wall running to the north-east, part of an adjoining block. The hall is at first floor level and runs the length of the surviving block. At ground floor level the gate passage must have continued through the building, with flanking walls on either side, though both have been completely removed. On either side of the passage there are rectangular chambers.

The hall is entered through a segmental arched doorway with sandstone surrounds, in the north-east corner. Access to it was from a timber stair presumably running along the outside of the missing north-eastern block. The position of the door suggests that at first floor level the rooms in the missing section probably acted as the service area, i.e., pantry and buttery.

To the west of the door the hall was lit by four large windows in the north wall. The best preserved of these is adjacent to the door and, when viewed from the outside, it can be seen to

have originally had a pointed sandstone arch. The window was subsequently blocked in the post-medieval period and a new rectangular window inserted, removing most of the eastern jamb. Only the eastern sandstone jamb of the second window from the door survives. Today there is no trace of the third window, but a photograph from the Lawrence Collection and a late 19th century sketch of the castle show a block of masonry with window, which has subsequently collapsed. Only the western jamb of the fourth window, at the dais end of the hall, survives.

There is no evidence within the hall for the fireplace. There is no space for one along the north wall because of the windows, so it must either have been set into the south wall where no evidence survives because the wall does not now rise high enough to preserve it, or it may have been placed centrally on the vaulting over the western ground floor chamber. The hall had a timber roof.

The eastern chamber, by analogy with the western one and demonstrated by excavation, had a central pillar supporting a vaulted roof. In both the north-east and south-east corners of the chamber there are moulded sandstone stops with remains of diagonal ribbing running to the pillar. The line of the vaulting is preserved on the north and south walls, as an inverted W-shape of cut sandstone or scarring from where the sandstone has been removed. There are further disfigured stops in the valleys of the W, but the western corner capitals are both absent. The short section of surviving east wall also shows sandstone ribbing in the wall. It is noticeable that while the sandstone in the north and east walls is obviously integral with the building, that in the south wall sits awkwardly within the wall and is clearly added into the back of the phase 1 gatehouse.

Below the vaulting in the north wall are two opes, both of which retain enough sandstone around the internal side of their jambs to suggest that they are original to the building. Externally both these opes are badly disfigured. The chamber must have been entered either from the central gate-passage or through the eastern wall or both. Access from the passage can never be proven because of the missing wall, but there is some evidence for an opening through the east wall. The surviving overhanging portion of wall carries part of the sandstone vault ribbing, with part of a limestone arch below it. The northern side of this arch runs in line with the north wall of the hall, but there has been extensive refacing in this area and it is hard to know how much is original and so to get a proper idea of the function of the arch.

It is presumed that there was a barrel vault over the central passage, while the vaulting arrangement of the western chamber was similar to that of the eastern one. In the western chamber part of the central pillar foundation is extant and there are traces of the vault line in the eastern half of the south wall and western half of the north wall, but the western wall, at this level, has been entirely refaced in recent times and so retains no trace. The chamber was probably lit by two opes in the south wall but these are even more disfigured than those in the eastern chamber. The position of the western opes can only be seen from the outside as blocking.

The similarities with the eastern chamber end there, because the west chamber has two features which mark it out as a high status room, namely a fire-place and private access to a garderobe. The fireplace is situated in the eastern half of the north wall with the flue contrived to pass between the windows in the hall above. Only the line of the flue survives. The garderobe is the one mentioned above under phase 1. It is now accessed by a door in the west wall, the southern jamb of which appears to survive behind later refacing. The sloping passage roof shows traces of plank centring, and below this three steps survive. There were probably one step above and two below the existing ones, with the lower ones angled to turn the corner

into the chamber. The functioning level of the chute in phase 2 is somewhat lower than the original, and so the curtain had to be breached to reach it.

Given that this high quality chamber is directly under the dais end of the hall, it may have been the parlour and so accessed from the hall. At the western end of the south wall there is a blocked arch, seemingly between ground and first floor level, about which little more can be said at present. This would appear to have led up to the second floor of the west tower, and was probably the link between hall and parlour. The ground floor of the tower was only accessible via the parlour from phase 2 onwards. The question of whether there was access from the parlour into the entrance passage can never be resolved with certainty because the wall is missing.

The discovery of 29 pieces of high quality cut sandstone in the fill of the drawbridge pit, some of which very definitely seem to have come from the hall building, suggests that both of the ground floor rooms were of some importance. Thus, if one side functioned as a parlour, could the other have been the chapel?

3. The excavation

Prior to excavation, analysis of the standing structures suggested that the ground level inside and around the hall had been substantially lowered in the post-medieval period. The functioning level of the gate-passage, as discussed above (at 2.1) was the main indicator of this, together with the fact that the outside faced wall of the hall seems to sit on 1m or more of exposed foundation. Excavation confirmed that the whole of the interior had been reduced to the base level of the hall foundations. The only remaining medieval stratification lay within the foundation trench for the phase 1 gatehouse, and all that remained of the phase 2 cross walls of the hall were mere traces along their lines where the foundations had been cut fractionally deeper than the general level to which the ground had been lowered. The hall foundations stood on an orange clay subsoil while the earlier gatehouse foundations were cut to the surface of a light grey stonier clay directly under the orange clay.

3.1. The Medieval Contexts.

The foundation trench for the gatehouse complex received three context numbers, 16 for the east curtain wall, 45 behind the east tower, and 47 behind the west tower. The trench was wider than the foundation within it, to allow the wall to be faced from the base upwards, in contrast to the hall building where the foundation clearly occupied the full width of its foundation trench. The trench edge was tight against the back of the drawbridge pit but diverged in both directions to c. 3m by the east and west wall lines. This widening of the trench seems to reflect the changes in angle of the curtain wall at either end of the gatehouse. The trench itself was flat bottomed with steep sides and 70-80cm deep.

Two sections were cut across 47 at right angles to the wall, revealing a low footing 10-15cm wider than the wall raised upon it. In the western trench the base layer was context 55, a mixture of the two types of subsoil. Its thickness varied from 25-50cm in the west section face but its surface sloped up eastwards to occupy the full height of the east face. It was overlain by context 54, a light grey-cream redeposited clay varying in thickness up to 30cm. Overlying this was context 53, a loose dark grey clay mixed with stone and bones. In the eastern section through trench 47 the base layer was context 57, a c. 8cm deposit of grey clay interpreted as trample during construction of the wall. An English short-cross penny of King John was recovered from the layer. Context 57 was sealed by context 56, a c. 40cm thick deposit of light

grey redeposited subsoil with occasional spots of darker grey clay and this in turn was sealed by context 48, a mid to dark grey clay mixed with some redeposited light creamy-grey subsoil.

Two sections were also cut across foundation trench 45. The western one was quite tight against the wall and was not bottomed. Its single fill, 46, was a mid grey gritty clay mixed with redeposited lighter grey clay. Context 46 was also the upper fill of the eastern trench and overlay context 52, a fairly loose mixture of mid-grey gritty clay mixed with lumps of redeposited subsoil and flecked throughout with charcoal and smaller pockets of pure charcoal. Two small voids within the layer suggested that some uncharred wood had also been included in the deposit and had rotted *in situ*.

At its eastern end foundation trench 45 was cut by feature 63, running at right angles to the wall. This feature seems to be the western edge of the foundation trench for the missing east wall of the hall, which had been cut deeper in the area of trench 45 to match depths with the earlier phase. The fill of the feature was context 22, a loose mixture of mortar and small stones, which is interpreted as material left after the robbing of the east hall wall and curtain. The foundation cut, 16, for the east curtain wall contained no medieval deposits.

Inside the east tower a half section was taken down to the surface of contexts 14 and 15 and only half of this section was taken down further to the subsoil. Around the interior of the wall was an upstanding ring of angular stones of varying sizes with mortar between the stones, giving a fairly flat platform. This band was c. 50cm wide and dipped down to a central hollow, the base of which was c. 40cm below the upper level. This platform effect, context 14, is believed to result from the construction. Filling the hollow and bringing it level with the top of context 14, was context 15, a redeposited orange clay with a slight admixture of grey clay. A single square stake-hole, context 71, appeared as a void at the surface of the layer. It measured 8cm square and c. 15cm deep. The remaining deposits within the tower can be demonstrated to be post-medieval and are dealt with in the next section.

In the centre of the western chamber the base of the foundation for the central pillar within the chamber was context 30. The stonework is circular in plan and c. 2 m in diameter. In the eastern chamber the pillar did not survive as a masonry foundation, but where it stood is marked by a shallow circular patch of disturbed stone and mortar, context 60, slightly smaller in diameter than context 30.

Context 10 was the front wall and context 11 the spine and rear wall of the drawbridge pit. Both of these had been reduced in level by c. 1.5m in the post-medieval period, and a modern gas pipe trench, context 3, had caused further damage to the stonework.

Four other slight patches of stone and mortar might denote the traces of wall. On the line of the east wall of the hall was a roughly rectangular patch, context 61, measuring 1.25 x 1.4m lying on the northern edge of the gatehouse foundation trench. Further south on the same line was another patch, context 62, measuring c. 1m wide and running up to c. 2m from the north wall. There was possibly even a bit of masonry in this close to the wall. The other two patches lie on either side of the gate-passage and could be traces of the flanking walls or the back projections discussed above. The eastern one, context 64, measured c. 1.6m wide and ran out c. 2m from the east tower and partly sealed the foundation trench 45. The western one, context 65, had a width of up to 1.75m and ran to c. 4.25 m from the west tower.

3.2. The Post-medieval Contexts.

a) *Within the tower.*

Sealing context 15 and the upper ring of context 14 was context 5. There was no great difference between contexts 5 and 15, and the only reason that different context numbers were

used was to distinguish between the upper and lower parts, once context 14 began to emerge. The combined thickness of context 5 and 15 was c. 40cm in the centre of the tower. Context 5 contained two fragments of post-medieval glass and so is clearly late in date which means that, if it truly is one deposit with context 15, then the whole deposit 5-15 is late in date. Within the east tower, context 5=15 was sealed by context 4, a 20-35cm thick deposit of basically mid grey clay, mixed with small stones and gravel and with some charcoal flecking throughout. Context 6 was a c 45cm deep pit cut from the surface of context 4. The pit continues into the section and so its full plan is not known, but at the section it is c. 1.3m wide. Its fill, context 7, was a loose grey sandy clay, with frequent stone, slate mortar and red-brick and some charcoal. Context 2 was the general clearance level at the start of excavation.

b) In the gateway.

In the post medieval period, once the gateway arrangement had fallen out of use, there was a considerable difference in height between the inside of the castle and the outside. This difference has been equalised both by reduction of the passage level and a deliberate build up in front of the drawbridge pit, to create a reasonable slope for access. The two slots of the drawbridge were filled in at the same time that the spine wall 11 between them was lowered. Both beam slots were excavated down to base level, but the outer base level of the front wall 10 was not revealed. The trench here became too deep to work safely, despite stepping in. The full depth of deposits from present courtyard level to the lowest level excavated was c 2m.

On the outside of the front wall of the drawbridge pit, excavation was halted at a grey sandy clay surface 72. This was sealed by 49, a very sandy/ mortarly clay with stones, 10-40cm thick, which abutted the front wall 10. The tower at this point has had much of its batter removed and the face undermined, but at the very base of the trench, sealed by 49, was a short section of what is believed to be the lower part of the batter. Context 49 was sealed by 13, a similar layer, up to 50 cm thick in places, and this in turn was sealed by context 12, a thin, 2-5cm. layer of brown gravelly clay, which ran to the top of the upper surviving stone of the front wall 10. This latter layer is possibly a trample layer associated with the dismantling of the wall. Both contexts 10, the front wall, and layer 12 were sealed by layer 9, which extended into both beam slots as contexts 18 and 24. Context 9 was a loose mortarly yellow brown clay with occasional stones. At 50cms it was thickest by the front wall but thinned dramatically eastwards to c. 5cm by the east section. This dip was reflected in the deposit which sealed it, context 8, which thickened from 10 to 50cm into the dip. Context 8 was a loose voided stone deposit mixed with grey earth and mortar, which continued in under the tower wall to fill the void caused by removal of the batter. In this area the layer was left *in situ* because of the dangers of undermining the wall.

Context 9 sealed the front wall 10 and its continuation, as context 18, provided the main fill of the eastern slot. At the base of the slot under context 18 was context 23, a dark grey crumbly clay silt with some charcoal flecking varying in thickness from 1-10cm. In the western slot context 24, the continuation of context 9, also proved to be the main fill. Under context 24, and concentrated at the southern end was context 36, which seems to be a mix of the overlying 24 and underlying 37, which varied in thickness from 0-20cm. Context 37 was similar to the base layer 23 in the eastern slot, and thickened southwards from 0-10cm. Contexts 18, 24 and 36 contained a collection of twenty-eight architectural fragments.

c) The hall area.

At the eastern end the robber trench fill 22 has already been partially described. It filled

context 63, the foundation cut for the south end of the missing east wall, and spread part way along the foundation trench for the east curtain wall, context 16. In the south east corner it also sealed a remnant of the curtain itself, which has been re-utilised as the foundation for the present day boundary wall. This boundary wall runs roughly east-north-east from the tower for approximately 2.5m and then changes to a slightly more northerly line. The surviving portion of curtain runs to this point of change and context 22's northern limit coincided with this line. Further north the boundary wall has a marked foundation of its own and it appears that when this section of the wall was built the robber trench material 22 was removed from foundation trench 16. From the point of change northwards the fill of 16 was a mixture of any old rubbish that could be thrown in as backfill i.e. stone, slate, brick, scrap metal, broken bottles etc., context 17. A Dundee marmalade jar dates this activity to after 1862.

Cut into the western edge of the foundation trench 16 was a row of 4 post-holes contexts 25-28, sealed by the rubbish deposit 17. Post-hole 25 was circular and 85cm deep measured from the upper edge of the foundation trench. Its fill was a loose, root-disturbed mixture of mid grey clay and redeposited subsoil, context 31. Post-hole 26 at first appeared to be a single unit but at the surface of the lower subsoil it became two features, the post hole and a small square stake hole, context 33. The post-hole was sub-circular in plan and at its upper level had a full depth of 62cm, while the depth of the stake hole was 30cm. Both features shared a common fill, context 32, a mid grey root-disturbed clay. Post-hole 27 was oval in plan and had a full depth of 70cm. Its fill, context 34, was a root disturbed mid-grey clay with a large packing stone in its upper level. Post-hole 28 was circular and 77cm deep. Its fill, context 35, was similar to that in post-hole 27, except for the packing stone. The finds from the post-holes were all post-medieval in date.

To the west of the post-holes was a parallel row of three, contexts 38-40. Post-hole 38 was oval in plan and 19cm deep. Its fill was a redeposited subsoil. Post-hole 39 was also oval in plan and 26cm deep. It was possible to distinguish two fills within the feature; the upper, context 41, was a mid to light grey gritty silt with the occasional small stone, and the lower, context 42, was a redeposited orange subsoil. Post hole 40 was circular and 55 cm deep. Here too it was possible to distinguish an upper and lower fill. The upper fill, context 43, was a mid-grey silty but gritty clay with a couple of possible packing stones, while the lower was context 44, a redeposited subsoil. The finds from this row of post-holes were also all of post-medieval date.

There were two other post-holes cut into the subsoil at the eastern end of the hall. Context 58 lay directly on the line of the missing east wall of the hall approximately 2m out from the north wall. It was circular in plan and 40cm deep. Its fill, context 59, was a light grey-brown clay with a couple of possible packing stones in the upper level. The second post-hole, context 50, lay roughly central within the western chamber about 50cm in from the north wall. It was sub-oval in plan and 18cm deep. Its fill, context 51, was a mid grey clay with grits and small stones.

Within the eastern half of the hall was a rectangular area which had been reduced in post-medieval times to a slightly lower level than the surrounding areas, a step down of c. 20cm maximum. The northern wall of the hall seems to have been the northern limit while the western edge ran just inside the line of the gate-passage. The southern edge ran parallel with the back of the eastern tower, approximately 2.75m out from it. This edge was lined, on the south and west, with a low wall, context 20, largely of stone but containing some brick. This wall sealed the robber trench material 22 within cut 63, and continued out to the edge of foundation trench 16, where it appeared to have been cut by the secondary rubbish fill 17.

Context 19 was a compacted grey clay containing a high percentage of red brick, stone and late pottery, which abutted wall 20, and ran northwards to peter out short of the north wall. It sealed pillar base 60, wall remnants 61 and 62, post holes 38-40 and 58, but not post-hole 50. On the south side of the wall a c. 5-20cm deposit of loose grey stony and mortary clay, context 21, covered the area into the tower, sealing foundation trench 45.

In the western half of the hall, context 29 was a rough cobble surface occupying the centre of the east half of the western chamber. This surface was clearly the yard level outside a late lean-to building erected at the western end of the hall, the roof and wall line of which are visible on the hall walls. This surface rested on the subsoil, except for a small part which overlay context 67, the possible remains of the passage cross wall. Two small stake holes of indeterminate age, 68 and 69, and a modern rubbish pit, 70, lay within the northern end of the gate passage.

Most of the interior of the hall was sealed by context 1, a mixed modern disturbance layer.

d) on top of tower

Removal of the vegetation and topsoil on top of the tower, as context 75, immediately exposed the roofing arrangement described above at 2.1. Context 76 was the slate roof and 77 the clay into which the slates were set; 77 was also extended to cover the puddled clay sealing the walls and gulley.

e) the garderobe access.

There are at least two phases of remodelling of the eastern wall of the garderobe stairs. The lower of these has rough facing upon which sits a c. 25cm high section of well faced walling, which was at first thought to be the original east side of the stairs. This change from poor to good facing could indicate two separate phases but there is a likelihood that in reality they are two parts of the same phase because there is a definite surface, context 81, running to the junction. The upper rebuild is clearly the general refacing of the west parlour wall, described above. There is red brick associated with all the phases of rebuild and that associated with the earliest is re-used from elsewhere.

The west side of the passage has also been partially rebuilt. The lower part is original, while the rebuild is on a slightly different line so that the northern end overhangs the original work. There is red brick incorporated in this blocking. Along the base of the rebuild was a mortar spatter which corresponded with the surface of a fill layer, 79, which post-dates the surface associated with the east wall.

Within the wall the upper deposit was context 78, a loose mixture of brick, stone, slates, ivy-roots and brown sandy decayed mortar, which covered the whole area within the wall and was up to 40cm thick in places. It sealed context 79, a fairly clean, c. 20cm thick, layer of yellow-brown sand with occasional stones of differing sizes throughout. The overhanging blocking of the west side of the passage was inserted from the top of context 79.

Under context 79 the two parts of the area are different. Outside the curtain wall context 80, a stone/rubble deposit was dug to a depth of c. 40cm at which point excavation ceased because the recent wall forming the southern limit to the area was being destabilised.

Inside the curtain context 81 lay under 79. Its upper surface formed a hard level crust, which may have been a deliberate surface, associated with the middle blocking of the east side of the passage. The layer under the crust was a yellow-brown, slightly clay, sand with some stones and brick throughout. This layer sealed what remains of the steps and thus increased in depth northwards to the door where it was over 1m thick.

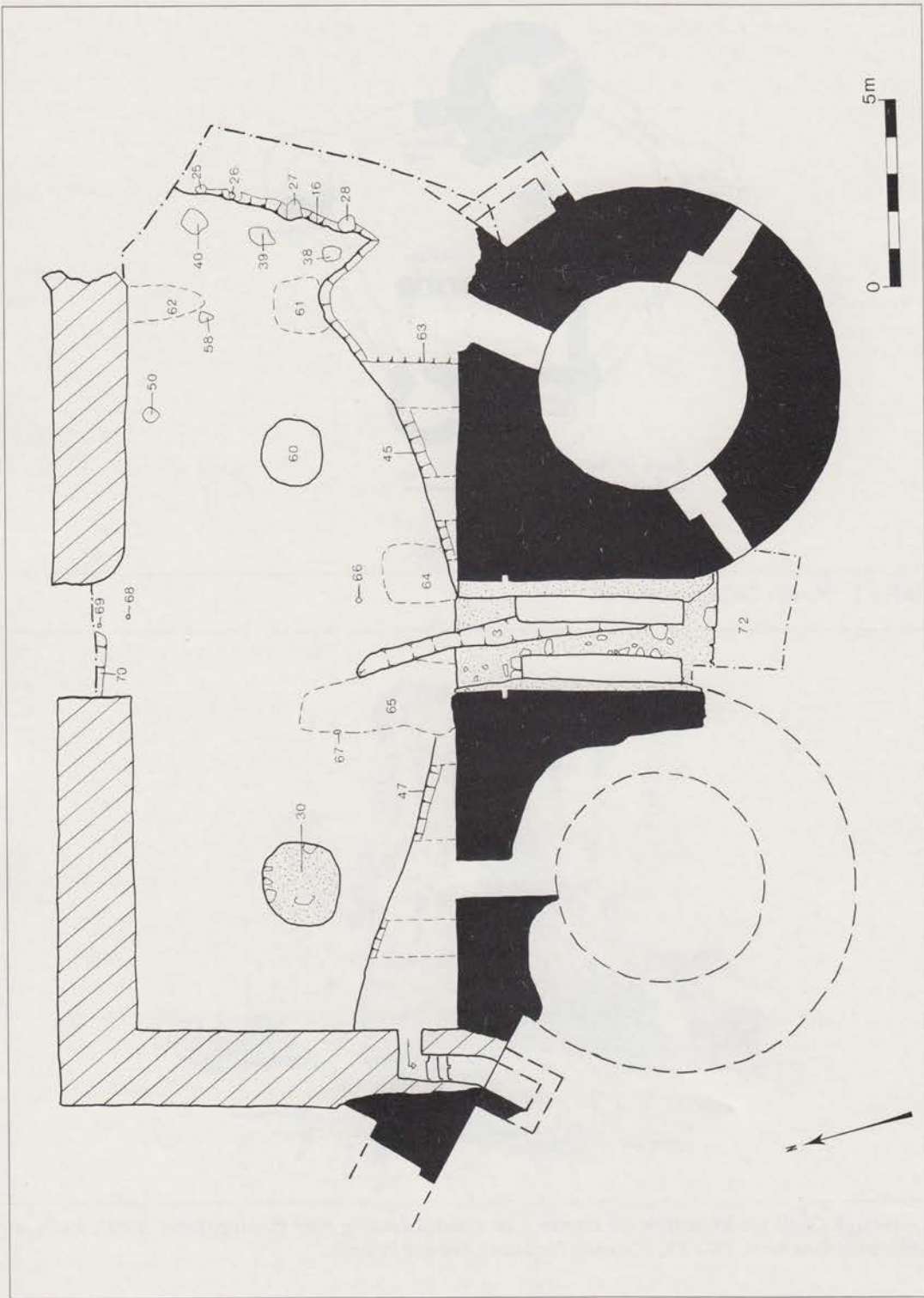


Fig. 1. - Plan of the gatehouse, showing phase and features. Phase 1 is solid, Phase 2 shaded.

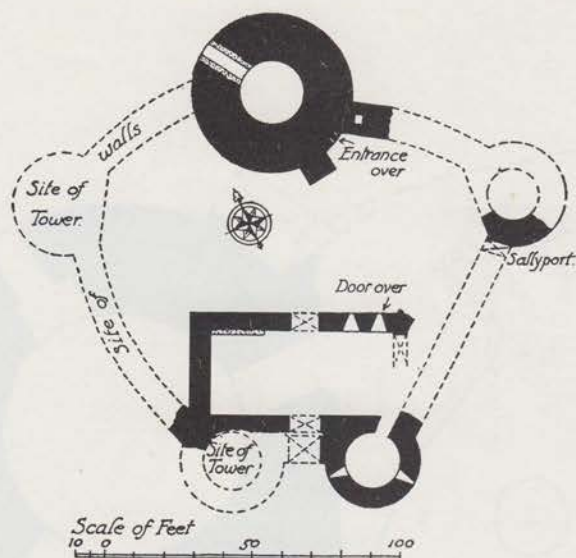


Fig. 28.

Nenagh Castle, Plan.

Insert to Fig. 1 – Nenagh Castle, plan. (Leask).



Fig. 2. – Nenagh Castle gatehouse from the exterior – an undated drawing from Fleming (James Stark), 9 vols. of *Irish Castlled Structures*, 1974 TX. (Courtesy National Library of Ireland).

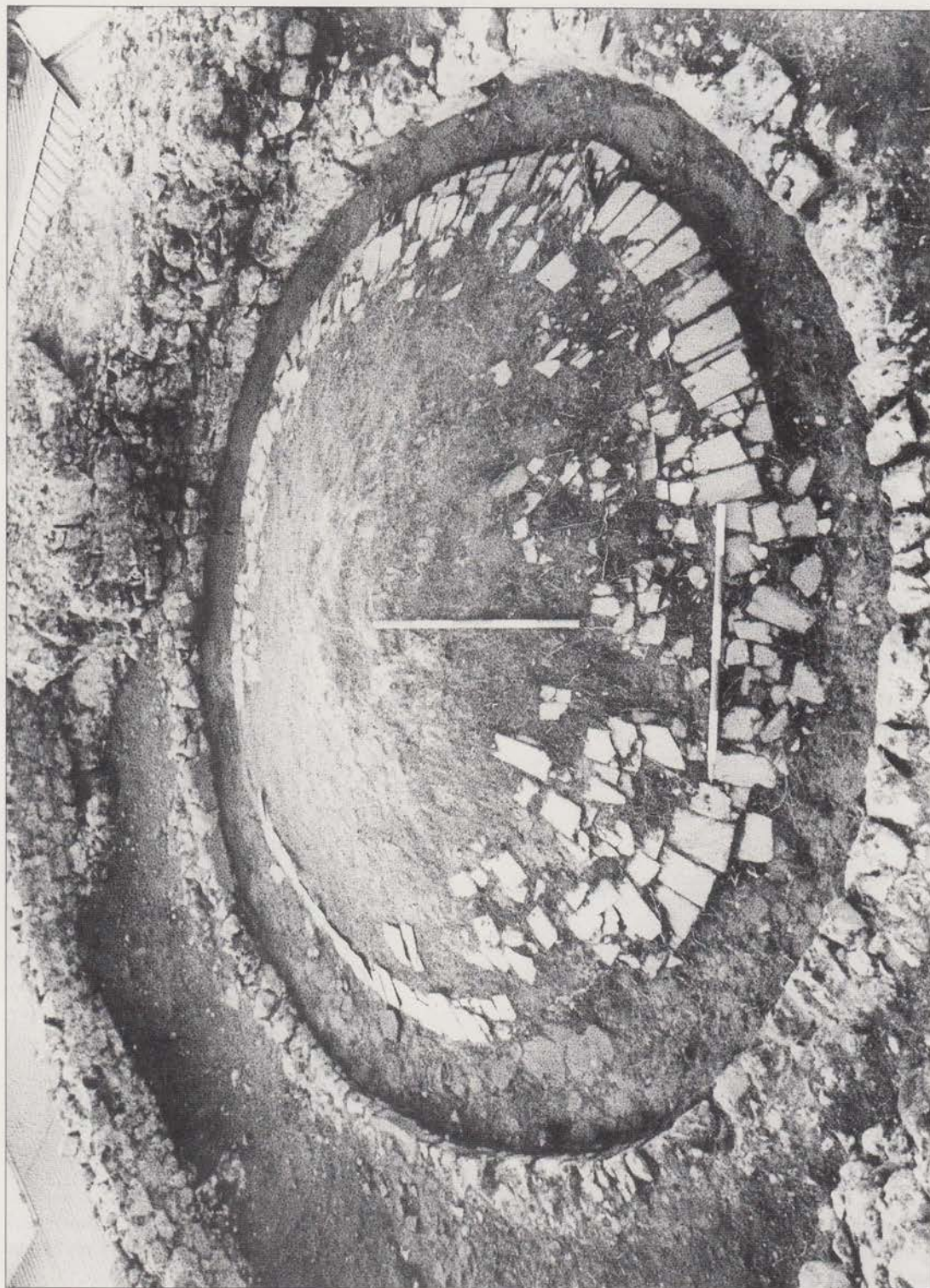


Fig. 3. - Roofing arrangement on top of the east tower.

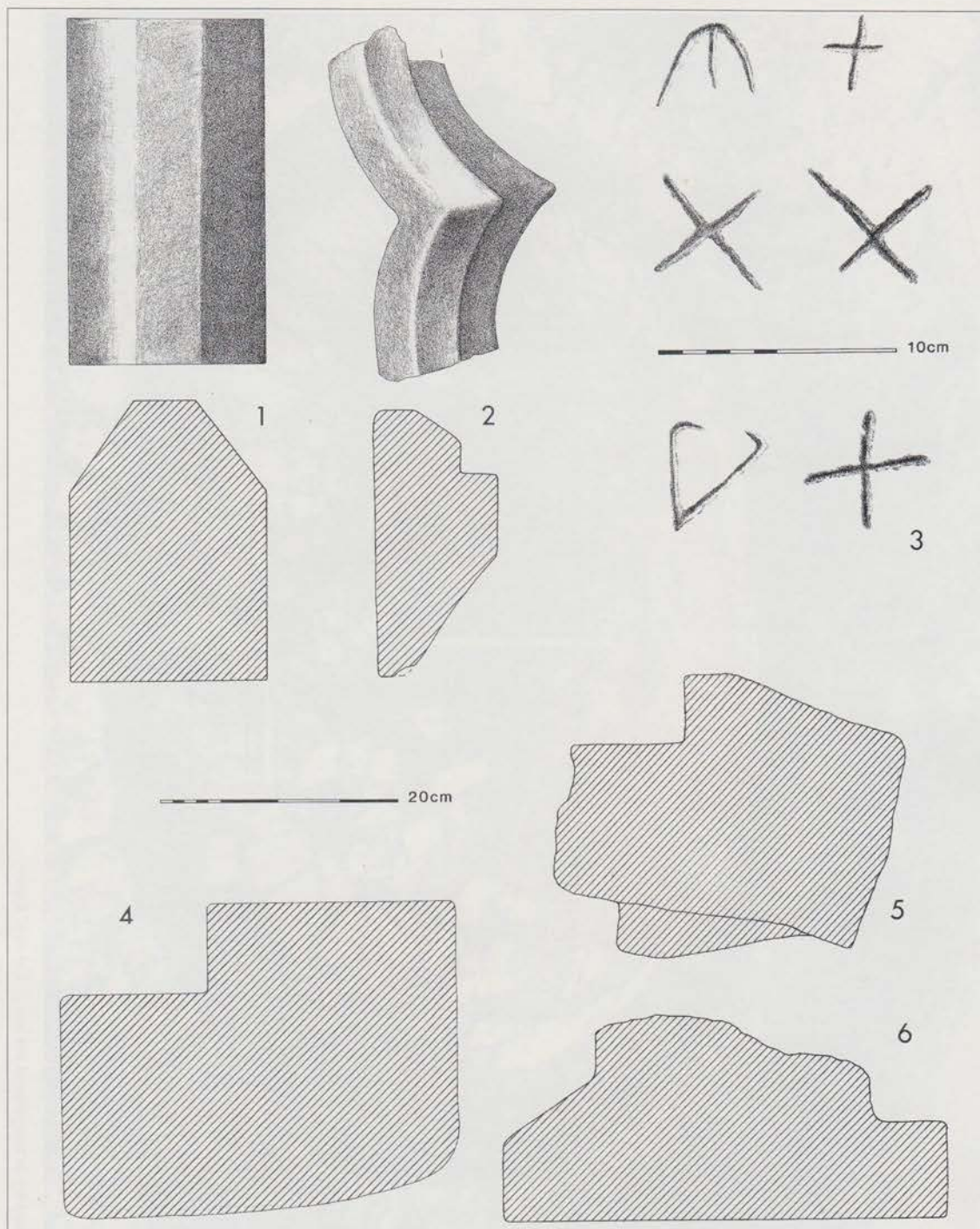


Fig. 4. – Architectural fragments. (1) rib section 3; (2) Cusped tracery 10; (3) Marks on stone: top left mason's mark on 1, top right assembly mark on 1, middle row assembly marks on 4, bottom row left mason's mark on 18 and bottom right assembly mark on 3; (4), (5) and (6) cross sections of 18, 21 and 19 respectively.

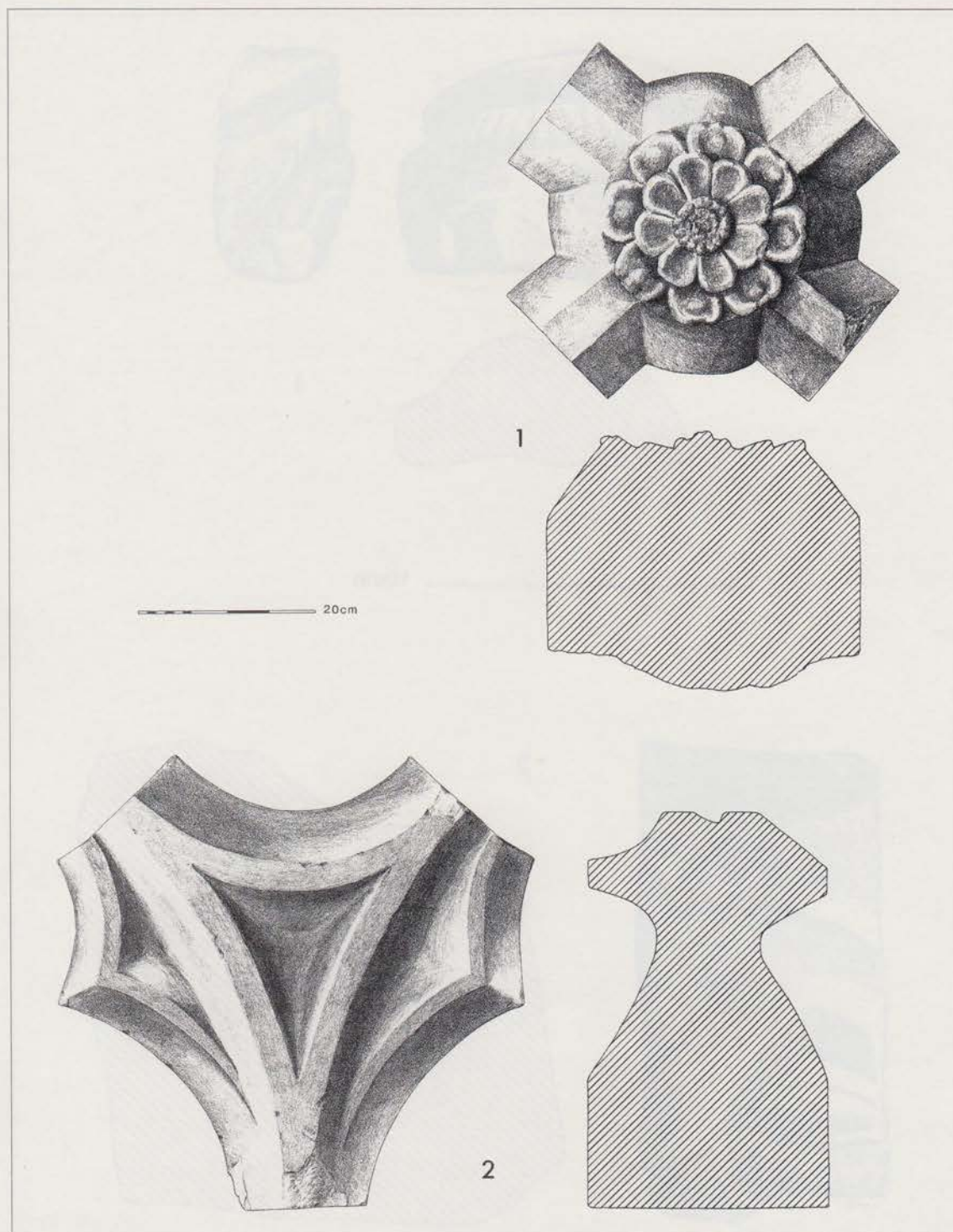


Fig. 5. – Architectural fragments. (1) central boss 16; (2) part of window, 17.

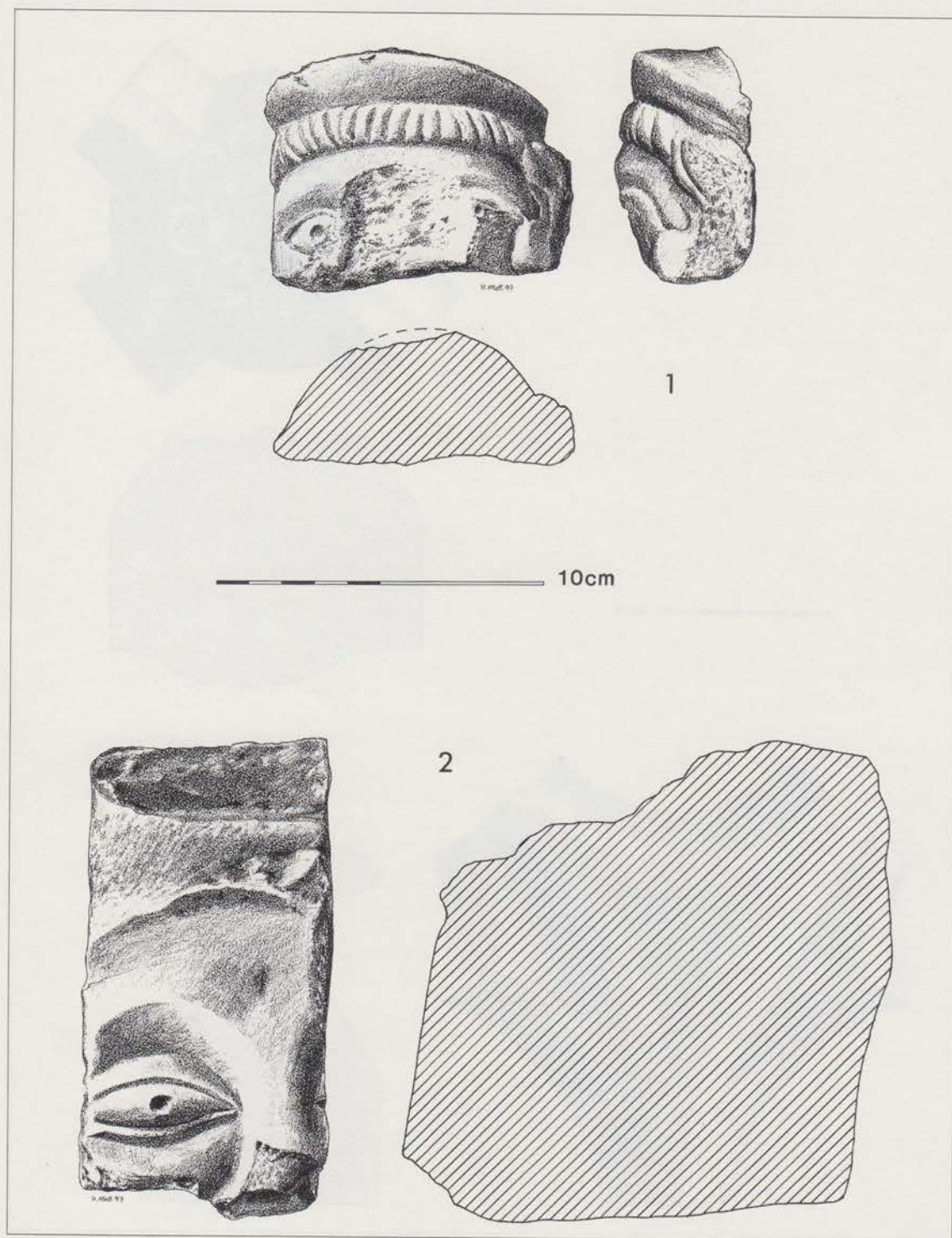


Fig. 6. – Architectural fragments. Fragments of human faces, 27 and 28.

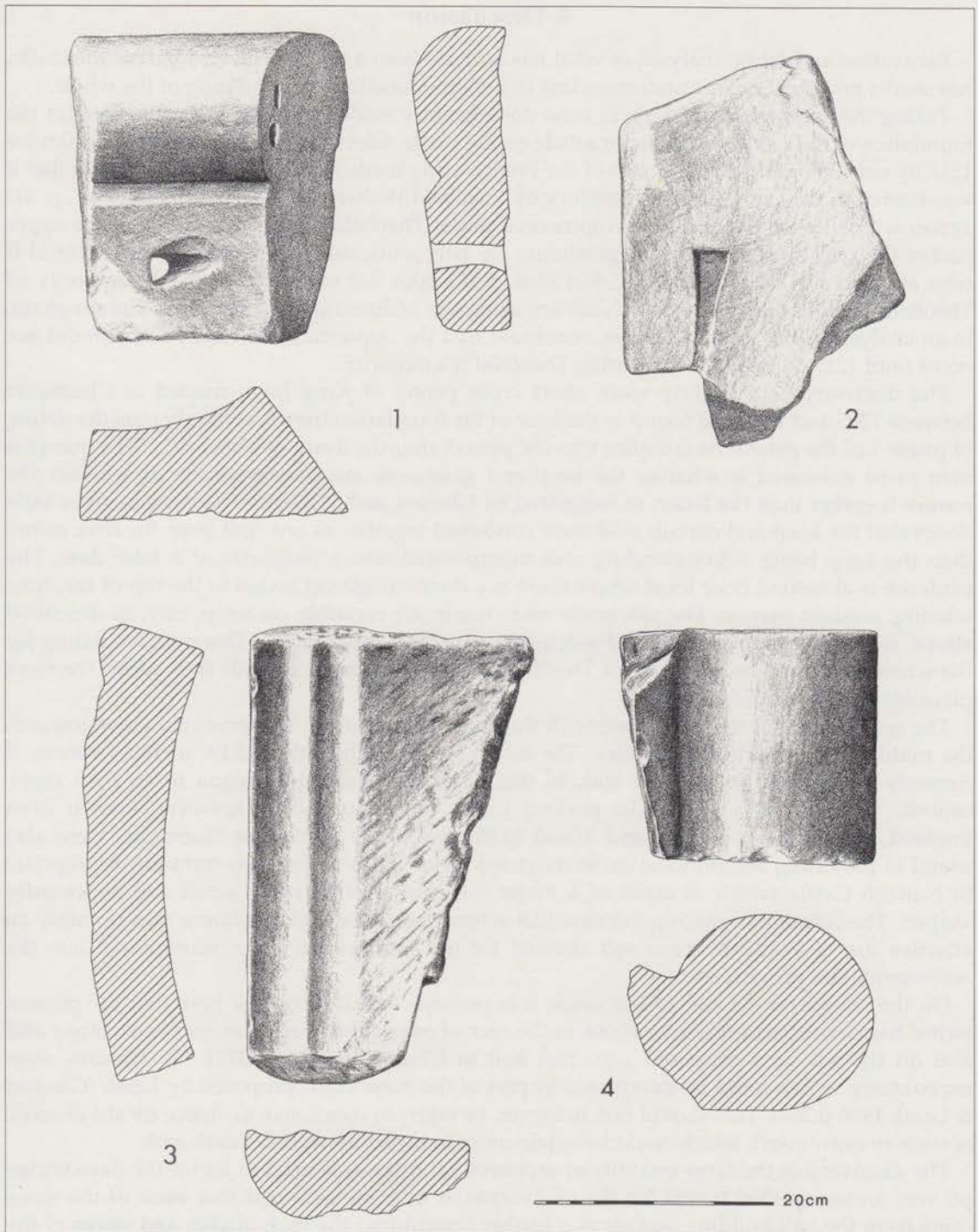


Fig. 7. – Architectural fragments. (1) window moulding? 6; (2) window or door jamb, with slot for metal hinge or cross-bar, (3) section of hood moulding 9; (4) roll moulding.

4. Discussion

Excavation and fabric analysis, of what has hitherto been a badly neglected part of the castle, has shed a new light on our understanding of both the functioning and dating of the whole.

Taking the latter theme first, there is no documentary evidence giving a specific date for the foundation of the castle. In his major article on the castle, Gleeson (1936) dismisses the claim for 1217 by one Colonel Harvey Morris of the French army made in Paris 1816 and suggests that it was started in the early thirteenth century by Theobald Walter (*obit* 1206). McNeill (1997, p. 31) agrees with Gleeson that building commenced under Theobald though suggests that the upper part of the keep and, possibly, the gatehouse are later work, attributable to his son Theobald II who attained his majority in 1221, but (*ibid.* p.50) does not entirely dismiss the minority of Theobald II. Both Gleeson and McNeill are using the architectural evidence but Cunningham, in an analysis of the written sources, concludes that the opportunity to fortify Nenagh did not occur until 1215-16 (1987, p. 34), during Theobald II's minority.

The discovery of a slightly worn short cross penny of King John, minted at Chichester between 1205 and 1218 and found in the base of the foundation trench, certainly puts the dating of phase 1 of the gatehouse complex into the period after the death of Theobald I. The question then to be answered is whether the keep and gatehouse are contemporary, or whether the former is earlier than the latter, as suggested by Gleeson and McNeill? There seems to be little doubt that the keep and curtain wall were conceived together as one unit from the first, rather than the keep being a free-standing unit incorporated into a perimeter at a later date. The evidence is at second floor level where there is a doorway giving access to the top of the, now missing, western curtain. The gatehouse and curtain are certainly contemporary, as described above, so it would appear keep and gatehouse are also contemporary. This puts the dating for the whole castle into the minority of Theobald II, and Cunningham's date thus seems the most plausible on the current evidence.

The remodelling of the gatehouse with the construction of the hall probably dates towards the middle of the thirteenth century. The arrangement of the hall and its ancillary rooms, if correctly interpreted, is unusual and, to this writer's knowledge, unique in an Irish castle context. The idea of a residential parlour under the main hall is, however, known from England, (Wood 1981, p.91ff.), and Wood (p.89) makes the point that "subvaults were also useful in providing accommodation in restricted areas". This assertion is certainly appropriate to Nenagh Castle which as *caput* of a major lordship is remarkably small and awkwardly shaped. The solution of placing the new hall across the back of the gatehouse was certainly an effective use of available space and allowed for the gate towers to be incorporated into the accommodation provisions.

On the subject of the size of the castle it is perhaps worth recording here that the present writer has conducted trial excavations in the rear of one of the properties on Pearse Street and also on the site of a proposed parochial hall in Church View (96E312). No features were encountered which could be interpreted as part of the outer court proposed by Leask (Gleeson & Leask 1936 p.264). This should not, however, be taken as conclusive evidence for the absence of such an outer court, which could have lain more to the south west or north east.

The discovery of the large quantity of architectural fragments used to fill up the drawbridge pit was an unexpected bonus for the excavation. It must be assumed that most of the stone came from the hall building and gives a further insight into the high quality and status of the building. It is extremely fortunate that it was dumped rather than reused.

Due to the stripping of archaeological deposits within the hall during the 18th and 19th

century, it is well nigh impossible to date the later blockings, refacings of walls, etc. A very worn English groat of Queen Mary found within the fill over the steps to the latrine may suggest a late sixteenth or early seventeenth century date for the initial blocking of the latrine stairs. The strange arrangement on the top of the tower appears to be 19th century but does not necessarily date the vault below.

In conclusion therefore it should be said that in the absence of a proper medieval stratigraphy it is quite remarkable that it is possible to present so much new evidence about precisely that period.

5. The finds

A fairly ruthless attitude was adopted with the finds because of the late date of most of the stratigraphy. All finds of medieval date have been retained, as have all the finds which serve to date the later post-holes. Otherwise only a small sample of pottery etc. has been kept from the recent deposits. No animal bone has been retained from what are known to be late layers. Finds are listed by registration number and, if referred to, should be prefixed with 96E228:.

Coins

35, silver short-cross penny, King John, Chichester mint, Willelm moneyer, date range 1205-c1218. From context 57, the lower fill of foundation trench 47.

90, silver groat, Queen Mary, English, date 1553-54. From context 81 in garderobe access.

91, silver, shilling, King George IV 1825. From context 75 on top of tower.

Pottery

30, marmalade jar, "JAMES KEILLER & SONS, INTERNATIONAL EXHIBITION 1862". From the late rubbish context 17.

42, stoneware pot, in two pieces; 43, base and part of body of stoneware pot; and 44, base of a cup or bowl, white stoneware with clear glaze, gold painted trefoil motif in the base. All from the general clearance context 1.

49, bodysherd of unglazed red earthenware, plant pot? From context 34, the fill of post-hole 27.

62, bodysherd, creamy sandy earthenware, with white glaze and trace of Willow-pattern decor. From context 59, the fill of post-hole 58.

65, base sherd, white glazed earthenware, painted blue motif on inside; 66, base sherd, glazed white earthenware with transfer decoration on the exterior; 67, base sherd, glazed white earthenware; and 69, base angle, Brownware, with internal glaze. All from context 4 in the tower.

74, broad collar rim, unglazed red earthenware, plant pot?; and 75, bodysherd, unglazed red earthenware, plant pot?. Both from context 31, the fill of post-hole 25.

95, base/body sherd, tankard?; glazed white earthenware, with brown transfer decoration and maker's transfer on base; and 96, base/body sherd, plate; glazed white earthenware, pale blue/grey transfer decoration. Both from context 79 within the garderobe stairs.

97, rim, bowl?; red earthenware with internal brown glaze; 98, handle, cup; glazed white earthenware with dark brown transfer decoration; and 99, rim, jug/tankard; glazed white earthenware, with dark brown transfer decoration. All from context 80, outside the curtain in the garderobe area.

101, rim, bowl?, red earthenware, internal brown glaze; 102 base/body, red earthenware, internal brown glaze. Both from context 81 within access to garderobe.

Clay-pipe

- 36, bowl, oval stamp, "BEN NEVIS CUTTY". From 17, late fill of foundation trench 16.
38, bowl and stem, with illegible stamp on the stem; 39, bowl, oval stamp above stem, "GARRYOWEN CUTTY"; 40, bowl, oval stamp above the stem, "HOME RULE"; and 41, bowl in two pieces, harp one side of the stem, shamrock on other. All from the general clearance context 1.
64, stem. From context 4 within the tower.
92, 5 frags of bowl with harp and shamrock decoration; 93, fragment. of stem, stamped "Glasgow"; and 94, stem fragment. All from context 75 on top of the east tower.
100, fragment of bowl, partial oval stamp, upper line reads "H.....", lower "PI.....". From context 80 outside the curtain in the garderobe area.

Red Brick

- 34, fragment, from context 41, the fill of post-hole 39.
46, half brick, from context 43, the fill of post-hole 40.
47, half brick, from the robber trench context 22.
48, fragment, from context 34, the fill of post-hole 27.
50, fragment, from context 8 on the south side of the drawbridge pit.
51, half brick, surviving, from context 7, the fill of pit 6 in the tower.
54, fragment, from context 13 outside the drawbridge pit.
58, fragment, from context 42, fill of 39.
61, corner fragment, from context 59, the fill of post-hole 58.
70, fragment of red brick, from context 4 in the tower.
87, two fragments, from context 49, the lowest excavated level outside the drawbridge pit.
103, sample, half brick, mortar on all surfaces, showing reuse, from context 81 within the garderobe stairway.

Glass

- 31, clear, bottle sherd; and 32, ditto. From context 34, the fill of post-hole 27.
45, sauce bottle? rectangular body with chamfered corners and long round neck. "6841 EB & CO" on base. From the general clearance context 1.
55, green, bottle, body sherd; and 56, fragment of window glass. Both from context 5 in the tower.
57, pale green, rim, bottle. From context 43, the fill of post-hole 40.
60, brown, bottle neck. From context 44, the fill of post-hole 40.
63, body sherd, bottle with chamfered corners. From context 59, the fill of post-hole 58.
68, fragment window glass. From context 4 in the tower
71, bottle base, with 8 pointed star containing the letter R in the centre; 72, clear body sherd, bottle; and 73, green body sherd, bottle. All from context 31, the fill of post-hole 25.
76, fragment, window glass. From the clearance context 2 within the tower.
88. Two sherds of the same clear glass bottle. From context 49, the lowest excavated layer outside the drawbridge pit.

Architectural details

All the fragments came from the drawbridge pit, context 18 in the east slot and contexts 24 and 36 in the west slot. Sandstone unless stated otherwise.
See Figs. 4 to 7.

1. Rib, with mason's mark. Context 24.
2. Rib. Context 24.
3. Rib, with possible assembly mark. Context 18.
4. Rib, with possible assembly mark. Context 18.
5. Fragment of roll moulding. Context 24.
6. Window moulding? Context 24.
7. Hood moulding. Context 24.
8. ditto.
9. ditto.
10. Fragment of cusped tracery. Context 24.
11. Cusped tracery. Context 24.
12. Block. Context 24.
13. ditto.
14. ditto.
15. Window/door jamb, with hinge slot. Context 18.
16. Central boss of a ribbed vaulting, with rosette decoration. Context 18.
17. Piece from the central mullion of a twin light window at the bifurcation point, with the base of the circular ope above. Cusped. Context 24.
18. Door jamb? Context 24.
19. Limestone, window sill? Context 24.
20. Limestone, part of arch. Context 18.
21. Window jamb? Context 24.
22. Limestone block. Context 24.
23. Hood moulding. Context 36.
24. ditto.
25. Fragment of hood moulding. Context 24.
26. Tracery cusp. Context 24.
27. Eye and nose of a face. Context 24.
28. Fragment of a face. Context 24.
29. Fragment. Context 24.

Other Stone

- 33, fragment, slate. From context 41, the fill of post-hole 39.
- 52, fragment, roofing slate. From context 7, the fill of pit 6 in the tower.
- 53, fragment of a roofing slate with perforation for hanging. From context 13 on the outside of the drawbridge pit.
- 59, sharpening stone. Fine grained stone worn on two faces with a pin groove on a third face. From context 24, the fill of the drawbridge pit.
104. Stone tile. Fragment of grey shale? Perforation for hanging 1cm in diameter. From context 81 within the garderobe stairway.

Lead

37. Musket ball? From context 49 in front of the drawbridge pit.

Animal bone

89. Cut fragment of antler tine. From context 49 the lowest excavated layer outside the drawbridge pit.

Unworked samples from medieval contexts.

77, from context 52; 78, from context 53; 79, from context 48; 80, from context 55; 81 & 82, from context 46; 83, from context 56; 84, from context 48; 85, from the lowest context 15 in the tower; and 86, from context 54.

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