Frontier Possibilities: A Re-evaluation of Anglo-Norman Archaeology within the Cantreds of Iffowyn and Offa

Róisín Burke

Abstract

The arrival of the Anglo-Normans to Ireland in the twelfth century caused a major upheaval in the course of the settlement, population make-up and socio-economic framework of the land. Ireland had never borne witness to such military superiority. This violent interruption of Gaelic processes created a situation of Gael against Gall and this bitter interfacing led to situation of frontiers being created throughout the country.

'The frontier' is to be understood as a process of interaction... It also of course has a territorial connotation, since the military measures taken by royal ministers and by magnates tended to concentrate on districts, where cultivable land and lines of communication bordered with upland or bog. In that sense Ireland may be said to have contained frontiers.[1]

The monuments in south Tipperary that reflect the Anglo-Norman occupation of the landscape represent a culture which conquered the native population but which struggled to maintain complete control over the area. The archaeology, which the conquering Anglo-Normans left behind, shall be re-evaluated within this paper to ascertain the possibility of frontiers existing within the study area (the medieval cantreds of Iffowyn and Offa, south Tipperary) and the role sites played in the colonization and subsequent settlement of the area. Fieldwork and research for this paper was primarily carried out during the completion of an MA by the author entitled *Forgotten Frontiers: A Re-evaluation of Anglo-Norman Archaeology in the Cantreds of Iffowyn and Offa*[2].

Physical Frontiers

Obvious frontiers in Ireland were located at the Pale[4] an area surrounding Dublin (the headquarters of the colonist's establishment within the country), the Shannon[5] and the Leinster-Ulster border[6]. Marchlands were frontier zones and these were the areas, which separated heavily colonized Ireland from native Ireland and were the periphery of Anglo-Norman settlement, which was constantly shifting through land losses and acquisitions. Many authors have theorised regarding the role a frontier played within the landscape, primarily Lydon[7] and O'Keeffe[8]. The Anglo-Normans responded to the frontier conditions of the Pale by constructing a series of earthwork castles, which were protecting the inner settlement, which was represented by stone castles. 'Mottes constitute a protective cordon around the city'[9]. This frontier landscape was an initial frontier type, which validated the use of mottes, as they are not as time-consuming to construct as castles. The settlement of south Tipperary partially followed this general pattern as the initial colonization and frontier was established
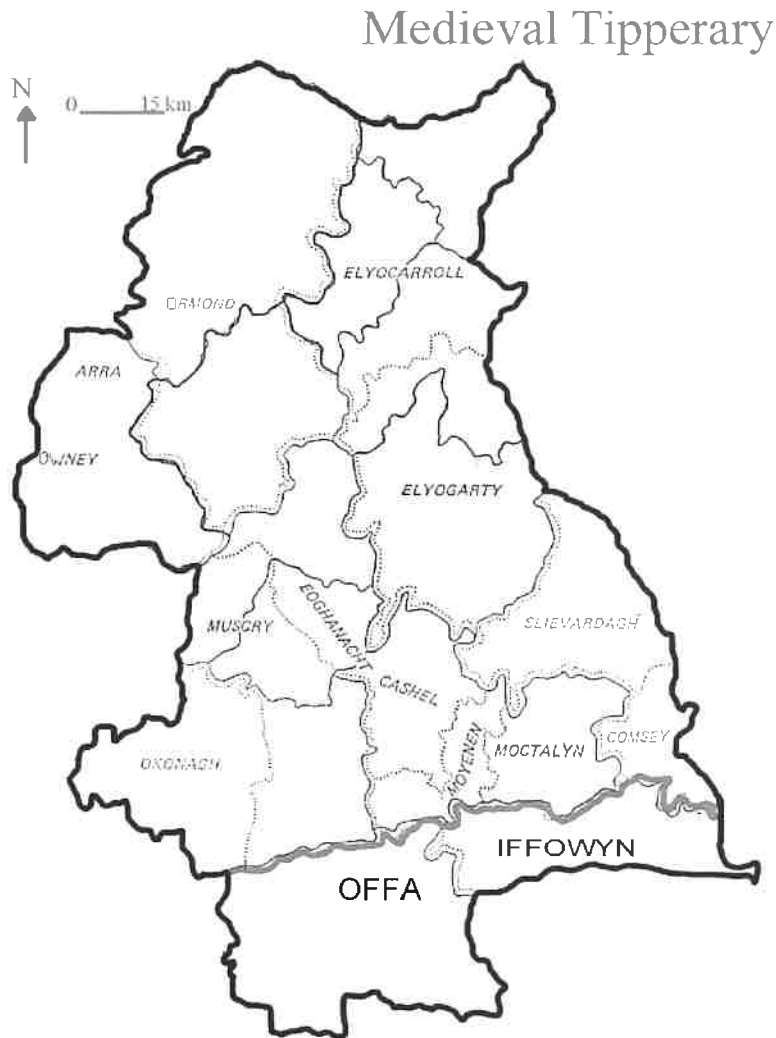
Medieval Tipperary

Figure 1.   Map depicting the medieval cantreds of Tipperary highlighting the study area[3].

within Iffowyn, where mottes were constructed and inhabited. These early earthworks represent an early initial campaign frontier, but the later stone castles represent the heavy presence of the Anglo-Normans in the thirteenth century. 'While boundaries were sometimes sustained by peaceful relations between the populations, elsewhere and at other times the frontier was nourished by tension, in response to which the Normans sprinkled castles heavily along their exposed flanks'[10].

The Offa Frontier

The distribution of the stone castles within the proposed Offa frontier along the northern base of the Knockmealdown Mountains represents a type of Anglo-Norman settlement that is preoccupied with the strategic and defensive elements of stone castles. 'We

should not expect to find a uniform coverage of the countryside with castles, in proportion to the number of new English lords, because there was not a uniform motivation everywhere to build castles[11]. However, it seems sufficient motivation prevailed in the cantred of Offa as there exists at the northern base of the Knockmealdown Mountain range a line of castles and hall houses. The use of the term 'frontier', according to O'Keeffe[12], implies the existence of a core, and I propose that the core of this frontier is the cantered of Iffowyn, which features a denser distribution of Anglo-Norman agricultural settlement (mottes, ringworks, a ringwork and bailey, manors and moated sites) than the cantred of Offa. Therefore, the frontier is the range of castles and Anglo-Norman fortifications, which flank the northern foothills of the Knockmealdown Mountains protecting the rich fertile farming settlements of Iffowyn from native and foreign aggressors.
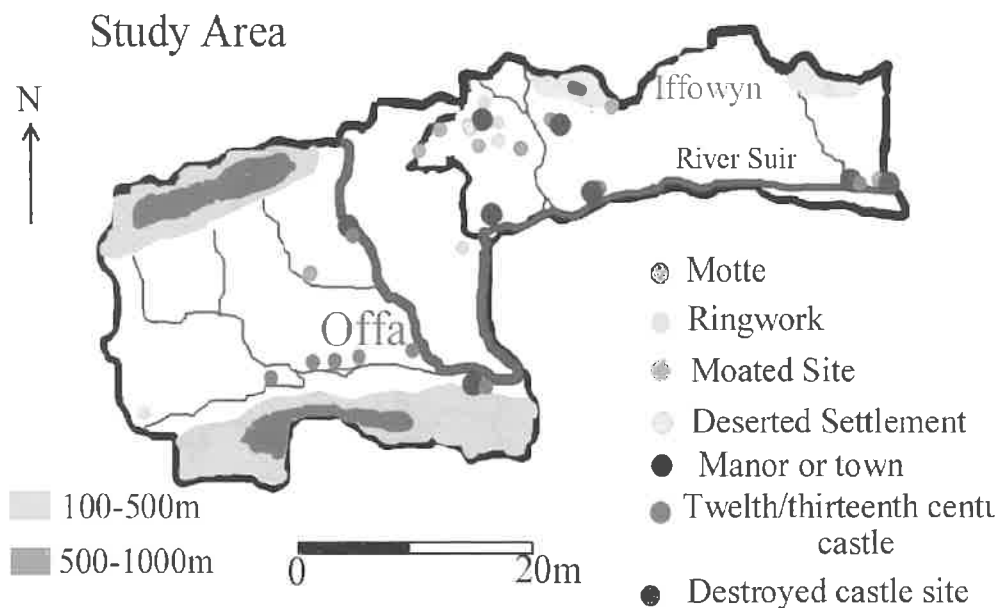

Figure 2.   Distribution map of Anglo-Norman sites within the study area.

'Every advance made by the Anglo-Normans led to some sort of fortification. Such was their strategy: you fortified to advance; you fortified to consolidate and you fortified for the future'[13].

The thirteenth century featured a marked change in Anglo-Norman and Gaelic-Irish relations: 'it saw the emergence of a new, militarily more efficient style of Gaelic opposition which was to bring about a very rapid collapse of the Anglo-French settlements in the forest region'[14]. The need for larger more impressive fortifications to impress, overawe and frighten the Gaelic rebels was obviously warranted in Offa. Also the Anglo-Normans were spreading their control throughout the country into west Waterford and Cork to create a large settler community 'Reading the calendars of Justiciary Rolls, one is struck by the foreign sound of many of the surnames, ...these names belonged to people who lived their lives in familiar places ...places we are conditioned to think of without Norman French as the vernacular'[15].
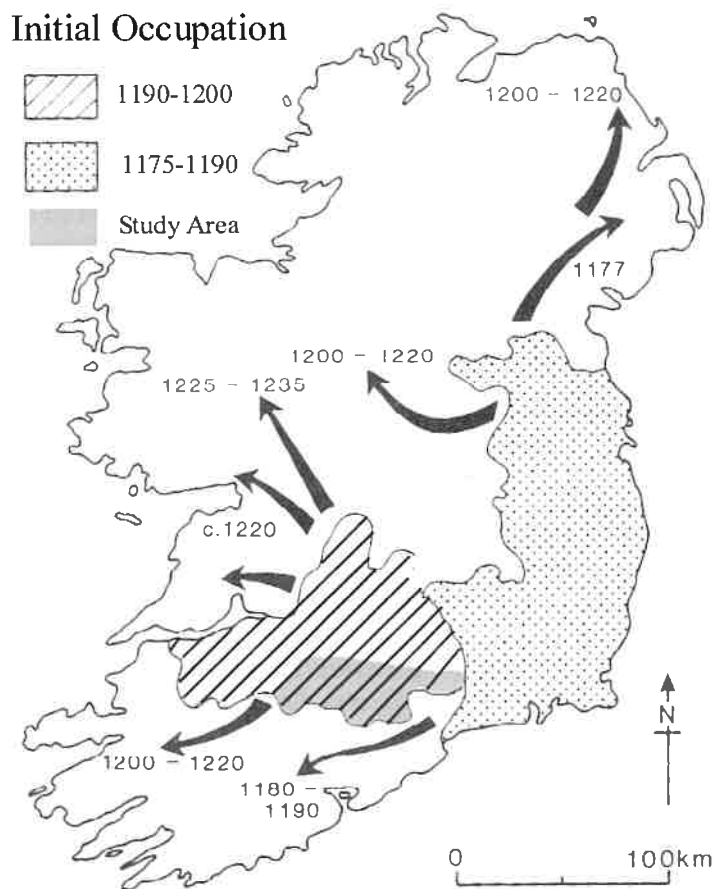
Figure 3.   Map of the progression of settlement of the Anglo-Normans with the study area highlighted[16].

Thus with a larger population vying for land and an unpredictable hostile native force the need for protection was ever increasing. The Anglo-Normans saw fortification as the only option to curb uprising and raiding. They employed the construction of large-scale castles in exposed areas to protect their interests based within initial core settlements.

The Anglo-Normans had to create solutions to individual problems posed by the landscape and the Gaelic Irish. O'Brien places great emphasis upon geographical factors affecting Anglo-Norman settlement as he stresses that this 'was the overriding factor when deciding on the location for a castle'[17]. Graham also stresses the importance a riverside location played regarding the siting of the Anglo-Norman fortifications.[18] Castle sites within the study area along the flanks of the Knockmealdown mountains are proximal to rivers and have commanding views of the surrounding landscape and the well-preserved examples at Ardfinnan, Newcastle and Castlegrace, and the account of Ballinhalla, identify impressive fortifications that inherently exuded power and military superiority.

The northern foothills of the Knockmealdown Mountains were obviously affecting the success of the colonization and sustained settlement of the core of the colony within Iffowyn had to be secured. The frontier exists and separates a peripheral and isolated thirteenth-

century Anglo-Norman community from the Knockmealdown Mountains and an ancient Gaelic-Irish tribe, the Déise. They had inhabited the land of Offa and Iffowyn, which was termed Northern Déise land, but had been pushed back over the mountains into County Waterford. Although a part of Waterford was one of the first counties to become a lordship, there must have been a real threat from beyond the Knockmealdown Mountains.

In Munster particularly, the struggle between Norman and Gael was very bitter, and the native race was gradually pushed back into the mountains. Swarms of colonists followed in the wake of the conquerors and penetrated even into the heart of Kerry and into the southwest of Cork[19].

Settlement within South Tipperary was fraught with difficulties largely due to a hostile native presence but by using old tribal boundaries, confusion during colonization was limited and many Gaelic Irish became labourers for the Anglo-Normans and toiled on manors created within Iffowyn such as Ballyboe. Once settlement of the land was begun by the Anglo-Normans they quickly grafted a feudal society on to the land and assimilated a large proportion of Gaelic Irish society into the archaeologically-invisible (at present) working class. This assimilation further deepened resentment towards the Anglo-Normans. Placename evidence gives us some clues as to the location of the Gaelic Irish population. Nicholls defined the place name 'Grange' as co-existing with the place name *Gráig* in the medieval era.[20] He defined *Gráig* as relating to *betagh* settlement (term for a class of workers mainly Gaelic-Irish although many Welsh were also brought over). There are two instances of *Gráig*, which has been diffused to Graigue within the study area. One placename is located on the slopes of the Knockmealdown Mountains close to Castlegrace. The other place name exists on the southern slope of Slievenamon close to the manor of Ballyboe. Relying on place name evidence due to the paucity of archaeological information, the presence of *betagh* settlement on the slopes of mountains highlights the tendency for the Gaelic Irish to be shunted to poorer land and vulnerable locations.

These indigenous people occupied the frontier of medieval Europe and their archaeology still lies beyond the frontier of invisibility. In the fifteenth century we recognise wealthy Gaelic Lords by their tower houses and by the ecclesiastical foundations for which the provided patronage, but their contemporaries of lower social rank are largely invisible, as is the entire spectrum of Gaelic society in the thirteenth century.[21]

Due to large-scale excavations now being carried out throughout the country, our knowledge of Gaelic Ireland in the early middle ages should gradually become more complete and the relationship between Gael and Gall should become more transparent.

Archaeological Remains

The line of castles in Offa begins at the west with Shanrahan, which is ruined and almost completely covered in ivy. Historical evidence suggests that it was constructed close to an old fort called Rathcua[22] and the townland name Shanrahan translates as 'old fort', however there is no visible archaeological evidence available to indicate the presence of previous settlement on the site. A corner of the castle remains and it has similarities with the hall house at Ballyboy (in terms of its size, rounded corners, similar stone work and location). A batter is evident at the base of the rounded corner/possible tower. The masonry employed is rough

rubble coursing using large blocks of sandstone. The castle is located within a graveyard with the River Duag running immediately south. South of the river are the Knockmealdown Mountains (1.20km approx. to the north) and the castle has an impressive view of the northern slopes of the mountain range.

Plate 1.   View looking south at the remains of Shanrahan hall house with the Knockmealdown Mountains in the background.

Less than 3.25km to the east is the hall house of Ballyboy, which is next in the line of defence. It is in very poor condition. The northern portion of the hall house survives which represents a building, possibly two stories high with rounded corners at the east and west, which are characteristic of a hall house[23]. The thickness of the walls is 1.50m approximately. Later insertions are evident such as an entrance in the northern wall. The masonry evident in the castle make-up is that of roughly coursed rubble limestone. The castle is located upon a rise of limestone on the north bank of the River Tar and approximately 3km from the northern slopes of the Knockmealdown Mountains and the Vee Pass through the mountains. The apparent strategic location of the site is striking.

Plate 2.   View looking north at Ballyboy hall house from the bank of the River Tar, which the hall house overlooks.

1km approximately to the east of this site is the quadrangular keepless castle of Castlegrace which appears to be centrally located in the line of defence as its location appears to correlate with the Vee Pass through the Knockmealdown Mountains. Castlegrace is located in a position, north of the River Tar, which allows the Anglo-Normans to have control of the only access route through the foreboding mountain range. It is immediately evident upon entering the site that a lot of remodelling has been carried out to create a nineteenth century walled garden, also fifteenth/sixteenth century insertions are evident throughout the castle. Circular towers are present at the southeast, southwest and northwest corners. There is a square tower at the northeast corner, which is covered in ivy and barely survives. A base batter is evident at the northwest tower. Loop windows, which would have provided flanking fire, are evident in the upper stories of the southwest and southeast towers. The defensive features evident on the remaining ruin at Castlegrace present a castle, which was largely concerned with defence and fortification and the siting of the castle on the slopes of the Knockmealdowns, corroborates this hypothesis.

Plate 3.   Castlegrace (foreground) with the Vee pass and Knockmealdown Mountains in the background.

Less than 4km from Castlegrace is the site of a castle at Ballinhalla. Historical and archaeological records depict the existence at this site of a castle with a surrounding moat. Unfortunately twenty years ago the site was levelled and only traces of a bank remain. However there is an archaeological record of the site contained within the RMP files compiled by Wheeler in 1958: 'Rectangular moated site, presumably medieval. Fosse very wide and deep.' The site is marked on the RMP as the site of Ballinhalla Castle and the River Tar is located south of the site. Wheeler did not investigate the interior of the moated site due to it being covered with thick scrub. The presence of the castle would provide further defence in the military cordon defending against threats from the south.
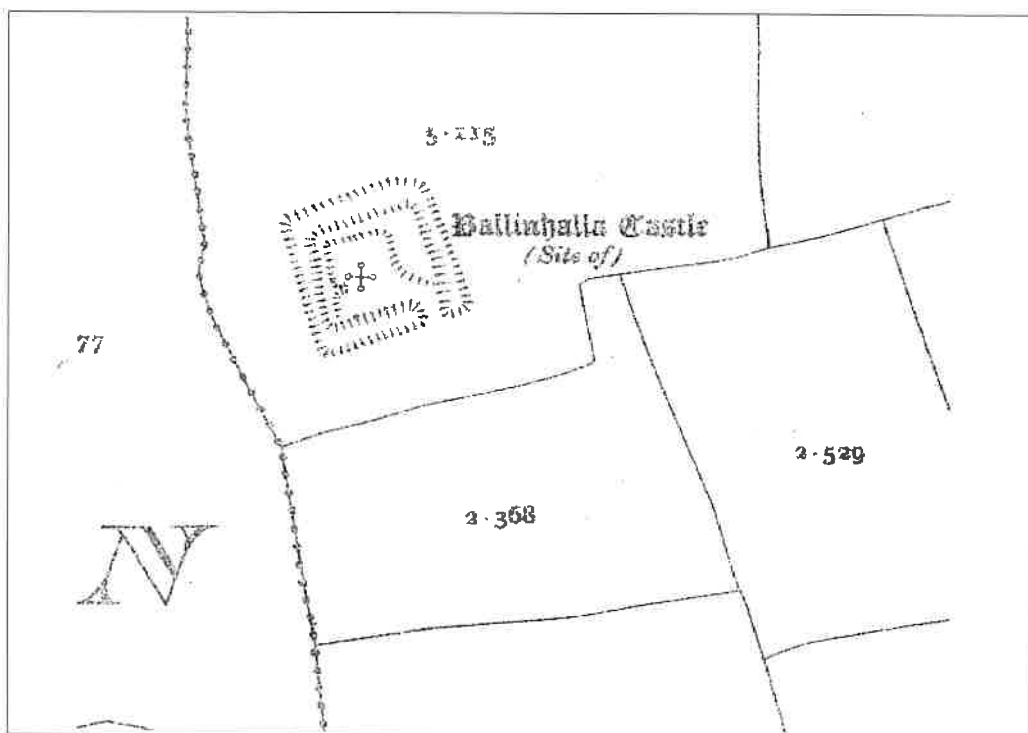
Figure 4.   Ordnance Survey Map[24] of the site at Ballinhalla, which was still demarcated by a bank and ditch. The site has now been almost completely levelled.

The line of castles deviates somewhat after Ballinhalla. 6km to the northeast is the twelfth/thirteenth century castle of Ardfinnan, which was one of the first to be built in the area. Ardfinnan has been noted as an important point along an ancient route way and has been credited as the point where St. Declan crossed the River Suir. The earliest fragment of the twelfth/thirteenth century castle is the round keep, which is similar to the early thirteenth century round keep at Nenagh[25]. The strategic location of this castle cannot be underestimated as it is situated on a limestone bluff looking south and west over the River Suir. The remains of the castle indicate that it was built for defence due to the batter and the slit windows at ground level, but the remains of the castle also exude status - especially at the ground floor where there was elaborate arcading, masonry and vaults. Ardfinnan castle was one of the first castles to be built in the area by order of Prince John. Other castles were erected at the time at Tibbroughney (Tibberaghny), which was in the cantred of Iffowyn, but now lies within Kilkenny. A large earthwork castle was constructed at this site. A motte was also constructed at Lismore which highlights the status of Ardfinnan as the sole stone castle of the three ordered. These castles were ordered to be built possibly to protect the northern extent of John's settlement in Waterford and could have also been positioned to facilitate the launching of an attack upon the territory of Limerick[26].

Plate 4.   View northeast of the thirteenth century keep and annexe at Ardfinnan.

Newcastle forms the eastern end of the cordon of castles protecting the Anglo-Normans from possible attack from the south. The site at Newcastle is located c.6km southeast from the castle at Ardfinnan along the western banks of the River Suir. This castle has a definite strategic element but there are very few traces of the thirteenth century castle remaining, as it seems to be mostly comprised of fifteenth/sixteenth century additions. Cairns has claimed the hall and the bawn wall are thirteenth century and that the Prendergasts built the initial fortification in 1300.[27] However, the hall features a chamfered fifteenth century doorway, which does not seem to be an insertion. The bawn wall with pointed arches could possibly be thirteenth century as similar arches have been noted in the thirteenth century town walls of Clonmel. The siting is comparable to that of the other fortifications along the frontier and the complex at Newcastle is small but easily defendable because of the prime location beside the river and at the foothills of the mountains. The siting of the castle marks the end not only of the line of castles but also of the Knockmealdown Mountain ranges at the east.

Plate 5.   View looking north at the Newcastle castle complex.

The architecture of the larger castles of Castlegrace and Ardfinnan are representative of an attempt to experiment with new design concepts not traditionally associated with twelfth/thirteenth century castle building. They could be both classified as keepless castles (the historical records of Ardfinnan depict a keepless castle with towers at the corners).[28]

We see those ideas at Dublin and Limerick. In neither case was there a great tower, but instead roughly rectangular enclosures were laid out and cylindrical towers were placed at the corners. One can detect influence from early thirteenth century France in these designs[29].
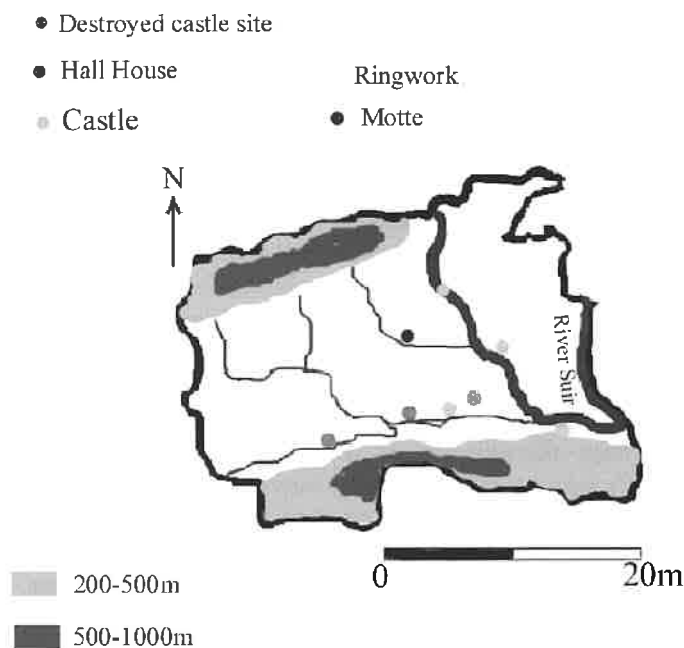
OFFA FRONTIER

Figure 5.   Distribution map, representing the frontier, which exists within the cantred of Offa

Castlgrace and Ardfinnan are the most impressive of the castle sites remaining due to the preservation of the sites. The strategic locations of both these sites is also very obvious, as Castlegrace was located at the mouth of the Vee pass and Ardfinnan was located on a historically-noted route way[30]. The importance of these locations merited impressive castle sites as both of these castles dominate the landscape.

These castles formed an obvious and indisputable frontier zone against perceived threats, which truly manifested in the thirteenth century. The only other example of a stone castle within the large study area is at Cahir, which was also an administration centre, and possibly at Carrick on Suir. The density and size of the castles indicate a colonizing force, which had to interact militarily with the native population and possibly each other to hold onto conquered areas.

Conclusions

A frontier can legitimately be conceived of as the interface between native and alien populations. Differences between the two populations found landscape expression in activities such as farming practices and domestic architecture, but the frontier condition was specifically articulated in symbolic form by the castle. 'The very existence of an encastellated frontier landscape – one of the first systematically fortified frontiers in Europe – tells us less about the threat of the Irish to the colony than it does about Norman perceptions'[31]. There is an obvious existence of an encastellated landscape interfacing with a Gaelic-Irish dispossessed and hostile group in Offa. The construction of these large castles required a large labour force and time commitment. 'A medieval castle rooted in the landscape had little power of obstruction in territorial defence, but a territory could be well protected by co-ordination of castle locations within it'[32]. The strategic line of defence, which these castles provided, ensured the protection of the interior of the colonial settlement in south Tipperary. The re-settlement and colonization of the land was carried out after full reconnaissance of the land had been completed and the most agriculturally-viable land had been identified. The longevity of the settlement was only interrupted due to factors which had not been accounted for: plague, economic and climate change and, in certain areas, Gaelic insurgence.

Thus it is possible to construct patterns that suggest the existence of regional frontiers at different stages of the colonization and subsequent settlement existing within the study area. A frontier merely served to protect the Anglo-Normans militarily; frontiers remained inefficient in relation to protecting from exposure to cultural influences. 'Frontiers exist because societies create them, and they undergo natural transformation, even to the point of disappearing, through social processes'[33]. The Anglo-Normans and Gaelic-Irish inevitably were exposed to cultural differences as a proportion was employed by Anglo-Normans and trading and even marriage alliances became common between the two factions[34]. Thus, although they eventually became culturally assimilated, their inherent differences and the threat posed were so great that it merited an obvious extension of a geographical frontier, which took the form of the construction of imposing castles which effectively sought to overawe and subdue those who harboured reactionary aggressive notions. This frontier model outlined throughout this paper merely gives us a glimpse at perceived attitudes in the turbulent thirteenth century when claimed land had to be defended by the construction of large scale and impressive fortifications to ward off interference and attack.

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