

Grounding History

A Spatial
History of
Northern
Ireland in 10
Maps

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Contents

<u>Map 1: Historic Sites by Ward</u>	4-5
<u>Map 2: Historical hotspots across Northern Ireland</u>	6-15
<u>Map 3: Scheduled Monuments</u>	16-19
<u>Map 4: Listed Buildings</u>	20-23
<u>Map 5: Prehistoric Sites (pre-600AD)</u>	25-28
<u>Map 6: Early Medieval Sites (600-1200AD)</u>	29-33
<u>Map 7: Medieval Sites (1200-1600AD)</u>	34-38
<u>Map 8: Elevations and History</u>	40-41
<u>Map 9: Megalithic Heights</u>	42-43
<u>Map 10: Wetness, Waterways & the Maritime Landscape</u>	44-47
<u>Making Sense of it all</u>	48-50
<u>Data Sources</u>	51-52



Dunseverick Castle, North Antrim

Section 1:

Historic Sites Today

Whether you are driving along the iconic North Antrim coastline, the St. Patrick's trail of County Down, through the ancient stone megaliths of the Sperrin's, or the ruins scattered around the lakes and waterways of Fermanagh, Northern Ireland has a historical wealth few other nations can even imagine.

To put it in context, there are 2,068 scheduled monuments, 15,803 listed buildings, and 18,164 recorded historic sites; everywhere we look stand markers to our ancient past. Given Northern Ireland's size, these figures are even more incredible, averaging a historic site in every 1.1km². It is harder *not* to see this history and heritage than it is to find it.

However, despite growing up on this little island, I knew almost nothing of this. And as I have grown older, I have discovered - more and more - that I was not alone, that this was an experience shared by so many both within and without Ireland.

The puzzle then is where to begin. For with so many sites, and such a great span of history, it seems an overwhelming and impossible task. Many others far more knowledgeable than I have approached it chronologically, tracing historical timelines, others have focused on specific periods or events. But I feel both approaches, while valuable in their own way, do not speak to the natural wanderlust and sense of discovery so many of us hold – the experienced reality of history.

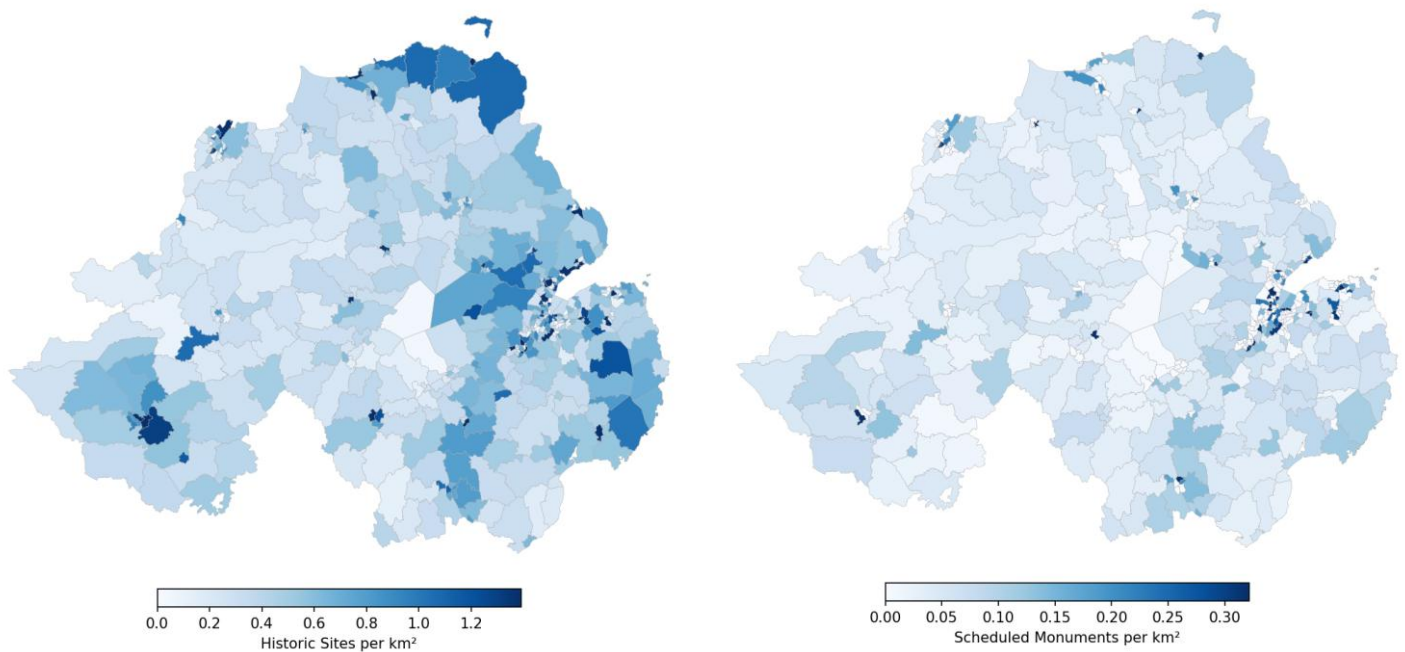
This report is structured to approach the question from a zoomed-out lens, viewing the breadth of Northern Ireland's history in the context of the geography. Through 10 maps, I will walk us through the historical landscape of Northern Ireland. We will consider where sites are concentrated, how this changes by historical period, and the role of topography in the patterns we can see.

So, if this sounds like something you want to learn more about, join me as we walk through the history and heritage of Northern Ireland.

Map 1: Historic Sites by Ward

Northern Ireland has one of the most diverse and complex histories in the world. Where to begin and understand this has been a recurring challenge, one many have tried and duly failed at. Instead of attempting such a herculean feat in this brief report, here we break Northern Ireland into digestible parts – wards. For across the 462 wards, we can begin to understand the 36,035 recorded heritage sites — ranging from Neolithic passage tombs and Iron Age ringforts to medieval tower houses and post-medieval industrial remains. That works out at roughly 78 sites per ward, though as we will see, the distribution is anything but even.

So, what are wards and why choose them? Well, they are the smallest administrative divisions used in Northern Ireland for electoral and statistical purposes. Each ward sits within one of the six historic counties — Antrim, Armagh, Down, Fermanagh, Londonderry, and Tyrone — varying considerably in both size and character, from tight urban wards in Belfast to sprawling rural ones along the Fermanagh lakelands. I fully appreciate they aren't a perfect lens for heritage, of course. Ancient peoples had no interest in administrative boundaries. But wards offer something useful that townlands or baronies do not, namely a consistent, mappable unit that allows direct comparison across the region. In this sense, they are the scaffolding, not the house. They give us a structure to begin analysis, but we must still do some heavy lifting when it comes to interpretation. I have therefore tried to overlay multiple data points to test and validate findings, ensuring they are appropriately caveated.



Figures 1 & 2: Density Maps for Northern Ireland Historic Sites and Scheduled Monuments

What the data shows is that heritage in Northern Ireland clusters. Certain wards account for a disproportionate share of recorded sites, and those concentrations tend to follow the landscape — coastlines, lough shores, river valleys, and upland edges where settlement was both possible and defensible. The 3 most heritage-dense wards between them account for 8.2% of all recorded sites across Northern Ireland, a pattern that points less to gaps in the historical record and more to genuine concentrations of ancient activity.

“The top 3 most heritage-rich wards account for 8.2% of all recorded historic sites in Northern Ireland.”

County Antrim leads the way with 5,517 recorded sites (either historic sites or scheduled monuments), followed by County Down with 3,513 and County Fermanagh with 2,593. At the other end of the scale, County Armagh records the fewest at 1,152 — though, as the data on scheduled monuments will show later, raw site counts do not always tell the full story of significance.



Struell Wells, County Down

Map 2: Heritage Hot Spots

I'm a visual person, so when someone begins to speak of history, I immediately begin thinking of ways to see it. Northern Ireland is no exception. Using wards as the tool, we can see four regions where historic sites are concentrated — areas where the density of archaeological remains speaks to centuries, sometimes millennia, of concentrated human activity. If you know where to look and what to look for, you can begin to see why. Namely the North Antrim coastline, the Sixmilewater Valley, Strangford Lough, and the East Fermanagh drumlin belt.

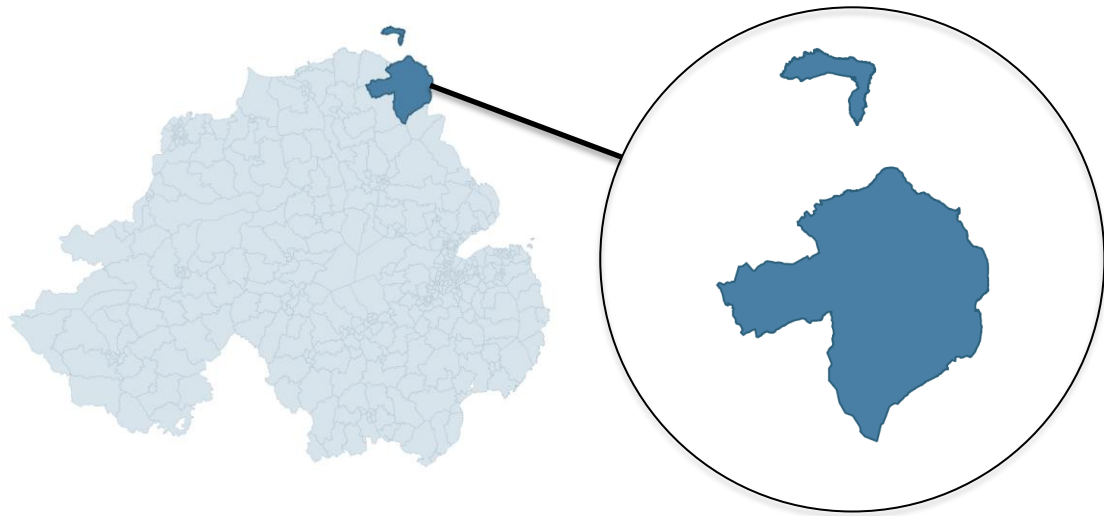
To ground these hotspots in specific contexts, we will consider case studies of the most significant wards within each hotspot as illustrative of the wider region, thereby contextualising trends in localities.

Northern Ireland Historic Monuments

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Torr Head and Rathlin



Torr Head and Rathlin ward has the highest number of historical sites, with an incredible 836 recorded historical sites and 72 scheduled monuments. What is particularly interesting is the incredible span of history these sites cover, dating back well into the neolithic, and then consistently throughout every subsequent historical period, up to the modern era. From flint factories and barrows, to cashels, raths and crannogs, and later castles and churches. To understand why, we must consider the strategic position of the island.

Rathlin sits roughly 28 kilometres off the north Antrim coast, separated from the mainland by Rathlin Sound — a stretch of water with a tidal race fierce enough to have claimed its share of vessels over the centuries. But it is also close enough to be readily accessible to the mainland. Indeed, it is Ireland's most northerly inhabited island - a strategic location for trade, with an abundance of the natural resources needed to thrive.

The island lies almost exactly midway between the Antrim coast and the Mull of Kintyre in Scotland, close enough to both that on clear days neither shore disappears entirely from view. For prehistoric communities moving between Ireland and Britain, this was a clear waypoint. The island's Neolithic and Bronze Age remains reflect this role. Flint was worked here in sizeable quantities, much of it sourced from the chalk deposits that underlie the island's basalt cap, and Rathlin flint has been identified at sites across both northeast Ireland and southwest Scotland. The island was a place of production and exchange, sitting at the centre of a maritime network that the Irish Sea sustained for millennia.

The most significant prehistoric monument on the island is Doonmore, an impressive promontory fort on Rathlin's western tip that exploits the natural drama of the basalt cliffs to create a defensive perimeter that required minimal construction on the landward side. Its date remains imprecisely established, but promontory forts of this type are generally associated with the Iron Age, and Doonmore's commanding position over the western approaches to Rathlin Sound would have made it a site of obvious strategic value. An

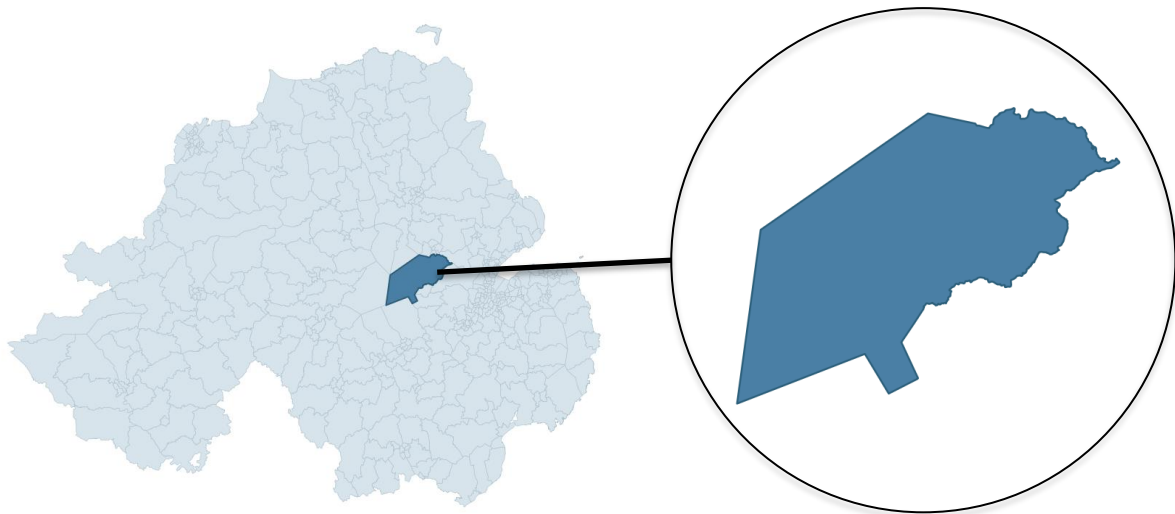
incredible 96 further enclosures and earthwork features are recorded across the island's interior, many of them incompletely surveyed.

The early Christian record is equally dense. Rathlin's association with St Columba — Colmcille — is long established, and the island is thought to have hosted a monastic foundation connected to his network before he crossed to Iona in 563AD. Whether or not that tradition is precisely accurate, the concentration of early medieval remains on and around the island's eastern end, including 18 recorded ecclesiastical sites, reflects a period of intense religious activity that fits the broader pattern of early Christian foundation along this coast.

The island's most famous historical episode — Robert the Bruce's winter refuge of 1306 to 1307, and the spider of proverbial patience he supposedly observed while sheltering in a cave on the island's southeast shore — is the moment Rathlin most often appears in general histories. But that story, however well known, sits near the surface of a record that runs far deeper. By the time Bruce arrived, Rathlin had already been inhabited, farmed, fortified, and fought over for at least five thousand years.

The site density that places Rathlin at the top of this analysis reflects all of that accumulated history compressed into a small and, crucially, relatively undisturbed island landscape. What the mainland lost to centuries of agricultural improvement, urban development, and road building, Rathlin largely retained.

Aldergrove



Aldergrove ward sits in the low-lying ground of mid-Antrim, between the eastern shore of Lough Neagh and the drumlin landscape rising toward the Antrim plateau. Above all else, the ward is characterised by raths — a concentration of early medieval ringfort earthworks that, per square kilometre, places it among the most densely settled agricultural landscapes in the entire region.

The ward boasts 346 heritage sites in total, of which 272 — roughly 78.6% — are classified as ringforts or rath-type enclosures. That proportion is exceptional. Understanding why requires a brief consideration of what raths actually meant in the early medieval period, because the popular image of a ringfort as a defensive structure is only partially accurate.

A rath was primarily a farmstead — a circular earthen bank, sometimes with an external fosse, enclosing a domestic space typically between 20 and 40 metres in diameter. The bank offered a degree of protection against cattle raiders and wolves, but its key function was social. Ringforts were the dwellings of the bóaire and above — the cattle-owning farming class whose status in early Irish society was measured in livestock, land, and the labour of those below them. Building a rath was a statement as much as a practical decision. It said, in the language of the early medieval Irish landscape, that the person inside it had something worth enclosing.

The ground around Aldergrove rewarded that investment. The soils here are among the most productive in Antrim — well-drained glacial till overlying basalt, fertile enough to sustain the mixed pastoral and arable farming that underpinned early medieval social organisation. The proximity of Lough Neagh to the east added a further resource base in fish and wildfowl, while the relatively flat terrain made movement between farmsteads straightforward. The density of raths in Aldergrove reflects not a single large community but a patchwork of individual family holdings, each with its own enclosure, scattered across a

landscape that could support them in sufficient numbers that they ended up, centuries later, producing one of the most striking site densities.

The spatial pattern of the raths within the ward is itself instructive. Rather than clustering, they are distributed with a regularity that suggests a landscape already divided into recognised territories by the time most of them were built — a patchwork of holdings separated by sufficient distance that each farmstead commanded its own field system and grazing ground without encroaching obviously on its neighbours. Many of the recorded raths within the ward boundary sit within 5km of at least one other, hinting at pairings or small clusters that may reflect family groupings or the subdivision of holdings across generations.

Few of the Aldergrove raths are individually famous, and that is the point. The significance of this ward lies not in any single monument but in the cumulative weight of a landscape that was, during the early medieval period, as intensively and systematically farmed as almost anywhere in Ulster



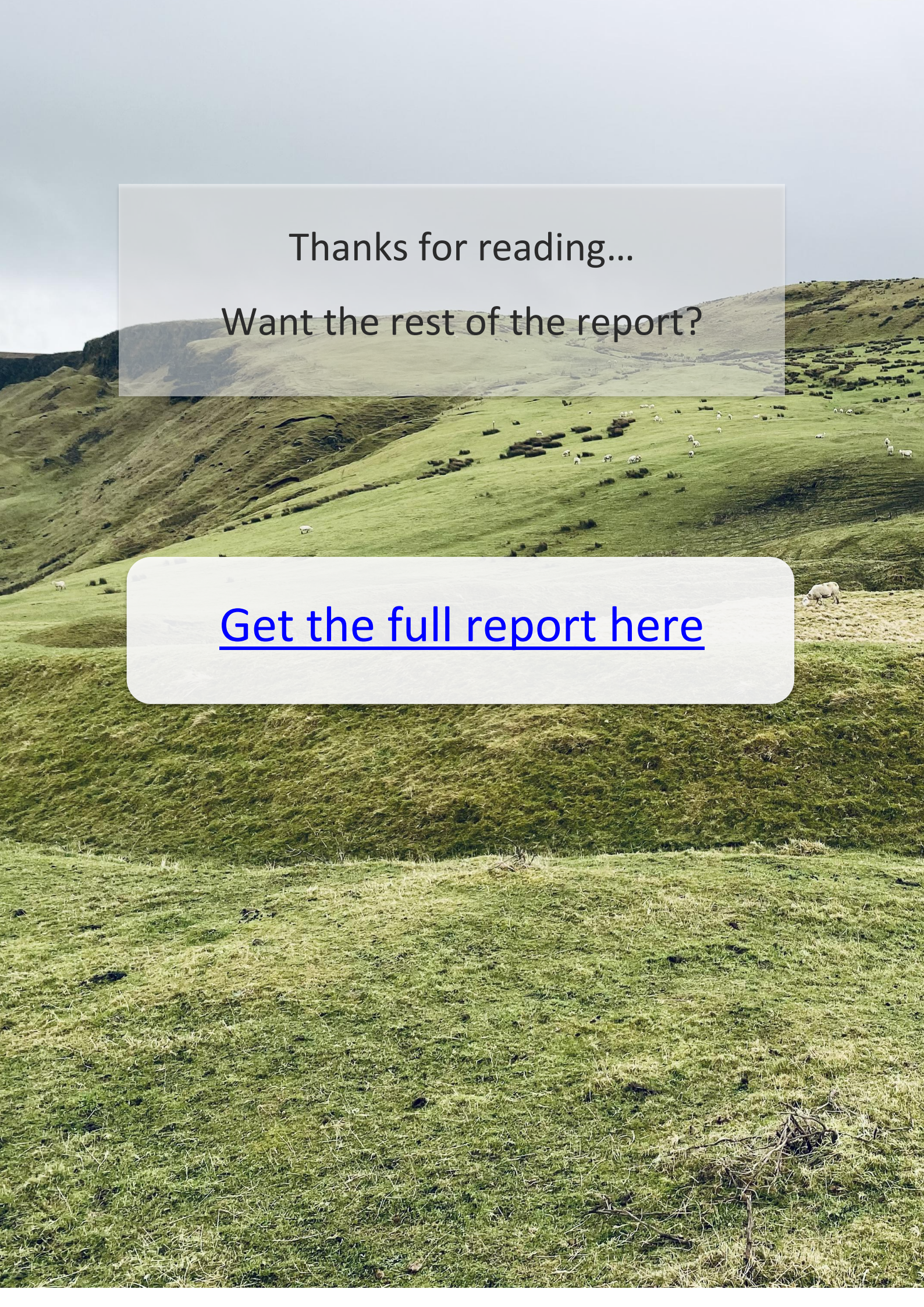
Drumena Cashel, County Down

Case Study: Medieval Antrim

Early medieval Ireland transformed the Antrim region into an ecclesiastical and political landscape. Monastic foundations appeared along communication routes (from Bangor Abbey to Antrim), exploiting both agricultural wealth and accessibility. Proximity to the great inland sea of Lough Neagh allowed religious centres to participate in lake-based travel networks linking Armagh, Derry, and central Ulster. The region's importance is reflected in repeated references to settlement continuity around Antrim, where early churches, ringforts, and estate centres clustered within productive farmland.

The Anglo-Norman period brought new layers of authority rather than wholesale replacement. Antrim's motte and bailey castle reshaped the region's focus and defended settlements emerged to control crossings and agricultural estates (for instance at Clough), reinforcing the long-standing strategic value of the corridor from Carrickfergus to Coleraine. Control of the loughshore meant influence over inland communication. Settlement patterns reveal adaptation of earlier Gaelic landscapes into feudal administration rather than their disappearance.





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