The Impact of the Normans.

Norman Motte. Reproduced with the permission of the Environment and Heritage Service, DOE.
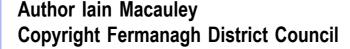
The Normans

The invasion of the Normans had a profound impact on the eastern seaboard of Ireland. They came to Ireland without romantic or high-minded impulse: they were colonists, seeking simply rich farm land to feed the booming populations of England and Europe. But the overlaid new, feudal political and social structures and new cultural motifs on to the Gaelic order: they began an Anglicisation of Ireland.

In 1177AD, John de Courcy created the Earldom of Ulster along the east coast. The pivotal point of the Earldom and English Ulster was Carrickfergus Castle. The Norman barons, the loyal core of the Earl's retinue, held substantial tracts of land throughout the earldom. In return, they were the Earl's officers in war and administrators and advisers in peace.

The Annals of Ulster record the Normans' arrival in Clones in 1212 and, a year earlier, at Caol Uisce, near Belleek. Bishop John de Grey of Norwich – King John's Justician or chief minister – and Gilbert de Costello built a castle, most likely a motte and bailey, in Belleek, but O'hEignigh, in alliance with the O'Neills, burnt it in 1212 and drove the Normans from Fermanagh. Gilbert de Costello was killed. The Normans returned forty years later to rebuild their stronghold in Belleek. This time Godfrey O'Donnell attacked and razed the fort, expelling, for the last time, the Normans.

The Norman colonisation of Ulster was only a partial success. A quarter of the province was conquered and incorporated into the Earldom. The remainder was out of reach and the Pale was harried by the neighbouring Gaelic order. By the fourteenth century, colonisation was without purpose – the plague had so decimated the population of Europe that the grain store colonies were no longer required. The social experiment was fitful. The old order was not assimilated into a European feudalism. But the infrastructure within the Pale was altered and towns – centres of commerce and a linchpin of the feudal order – were born.

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