

Crannogs

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Robert of Ferness, OL (kps1@cornell.edu)

What are crannogs?	Where are they located?	When were they used?
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wholly or completely artificial islands of varying size (10-50m diameter) built of stone and wood, usually enclosed or surrounded by wooden piles or planks• Sometimes connected to dry land by a bridge or causeway• “Crannog” likely arises from an old Gaelic term related to wood and/or trees• May derive from their wooden elements• The word itself is only first found in the 13th century• It may instead refer to their relatively modern appearance of being covered with tree growth, often looking like a cupcake	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Ireland: 1,200+• Scotland: 570+• Wales: 1• Mostly in lakes, some in sea inlets or rivers• Unevenly distributed: see maps below• Possibly associated with a ringfort on land• Possibly associated with agricultural land on shore• Usually located in shallow water, but some in deep water	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Some Scottish ones are Neolithic• Mesolithic artifacts are not uncommon• Definite pulses of re-use and new construction in the Iron Age and early middle ages• Usage can span hundreds of years• Used in the late middle ages as well• Still in use today by fishermen, hunters, and partiers• Vast majority have had no dating analysis• Scottish seem to be generally earlier• Wales: built in AD 890, destroyed in AD 916

Who used them?	How were they built?	Why go through the trouble?
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Royalty - luxury goods, great feasts ● Craftsmen - metalworking, woodworking, pottery ● Farmers - grains and plows and quernstones ● Herders - animal bones ● Religious - bell, book shrine, cross ● Travelers & Traders - imported items ● Prisoners or Hostages - shackle ● Military - swords, spear points ● Poor people - very few artifacts 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Deposition of stone, logs, woven brush, gravel, dirt, peat ● Driving in piles and planks ● Construction of one or more buildings on top ● Shaping timbers ● Voluntary communal effort? ● Slave labor? ● Forced by powerful elites? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Safety from wildlife or brigands ashore? ● Lack of living space on dry land? ● Save space ashore for crops? ● Show wealth or power? ● Claim territory? ● Prisons? ● Solitude (religious)? ● Control trade along river/lake systems? ● Community building? ● Offerings to gods? ● Kennels? ● Garrisons? ● Refuges? ● Lodging along a water-travel route? ● Feasting-houses? ● A mix of any of the above seems most likely as the environment, society, population, culture, technology, or fashion changed over time or varied from place to place



Figure 1. Cró Inis, a royal crannog on Lough Ennell, Co. Westmeath, Ireland. Photo by the author, taken from Dún na Sgiath, a royal ringfort associated with it.



Figure 2. Dún na Sgiath, a royal ringfort associated with the crannog of Cró Inis in early medieval Irish annals. Photo by the author.



Figure 3. A modern aerial view with Cró Inis at the bottom and Dún na Sgiath near the top. They are ¼ mile apart. Image from <https://bit.ly/39nvKwY> made 6/13/22 (date of satellite imagery unknown).

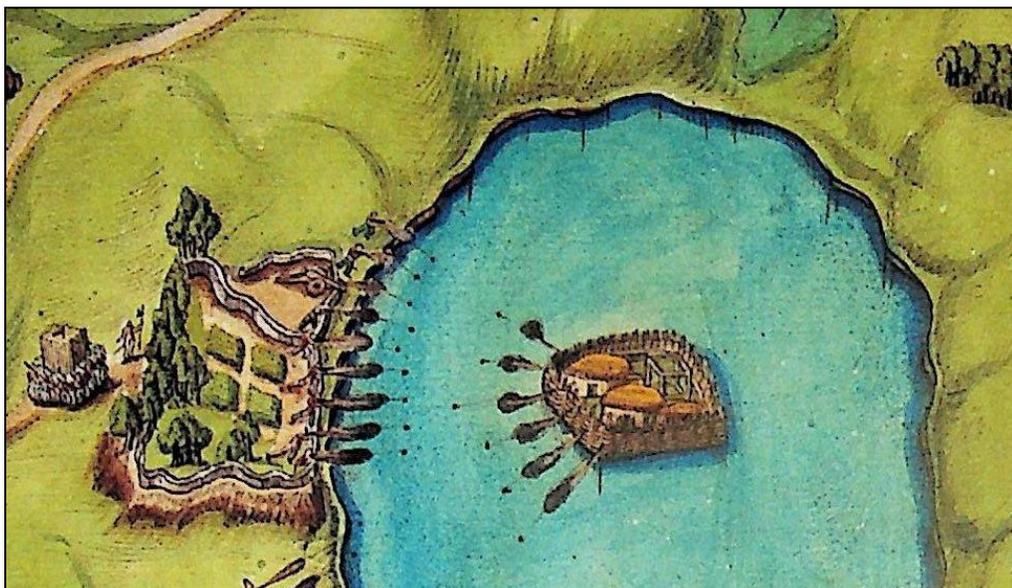


Figure 4. A 1602 aerial view of a crannog under fire from the shore, created by Richard Bartlett. Most books on crannogs include this map image, the earliest known depiction of one. (This is not Cró Inis.)



Figure 5. Aerial view of Eilean Breaban crannog in Loch Tay, Scotland. After Morrison, 1985, plate 8.

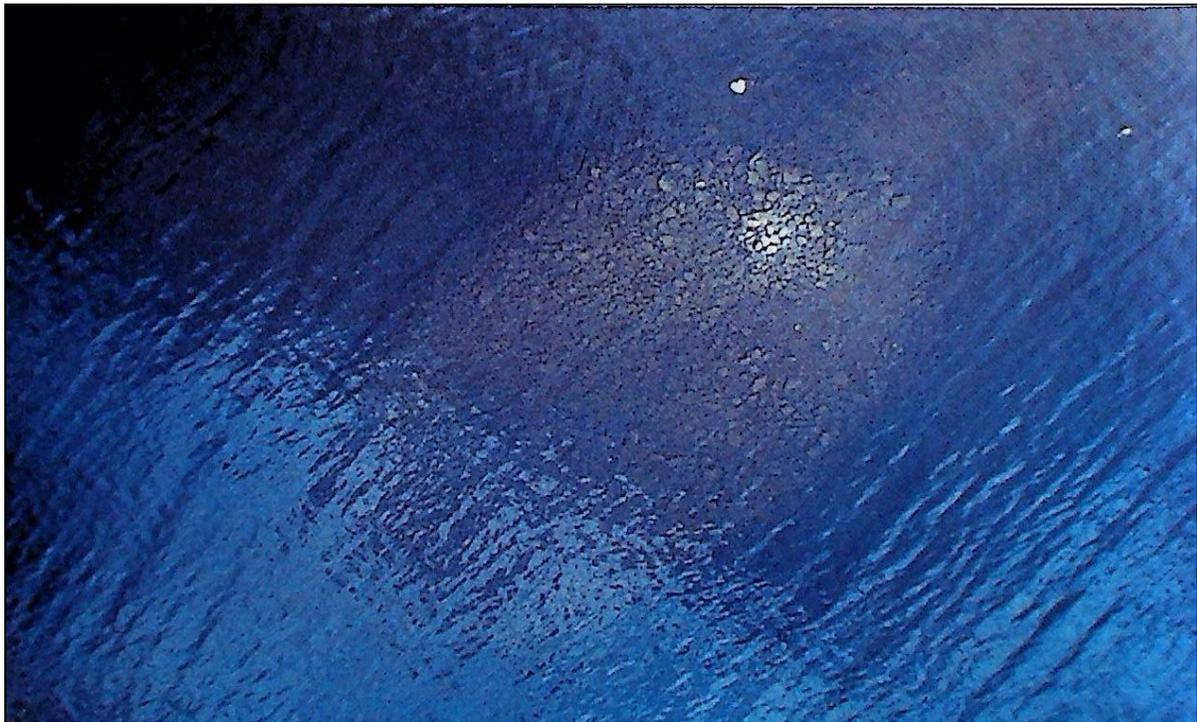


Figure 6. Aerial view of Oakbank crannog in Loch Tay, Scotland. After Morrison, 1985, plate 9. See below for a modern reconstruction of it.

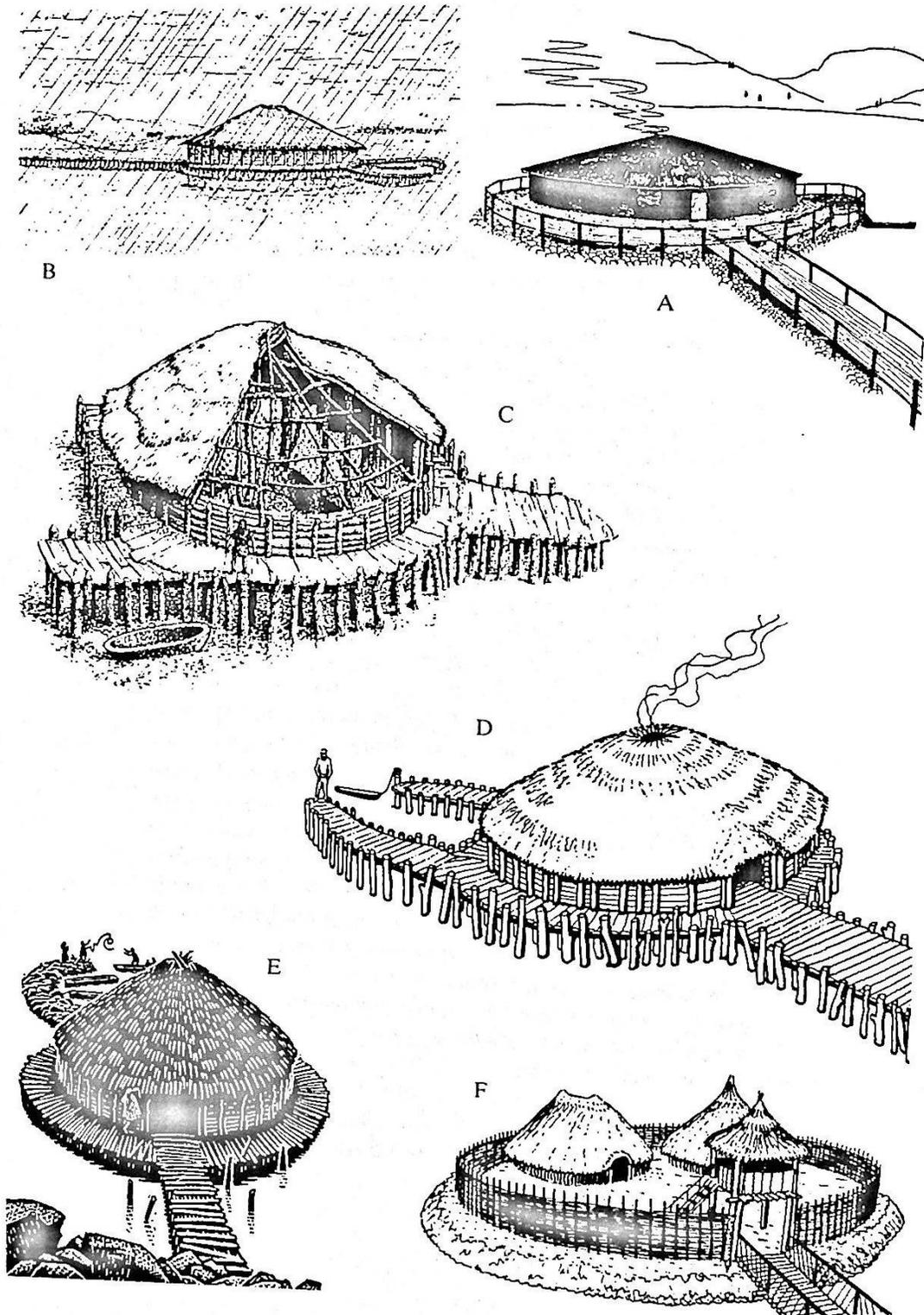


Figure 7. Some modern conjectural appearances of crannogs. (Many have no evidence of access via bridge or causeway.) After Morrison, 1985, p. 18.

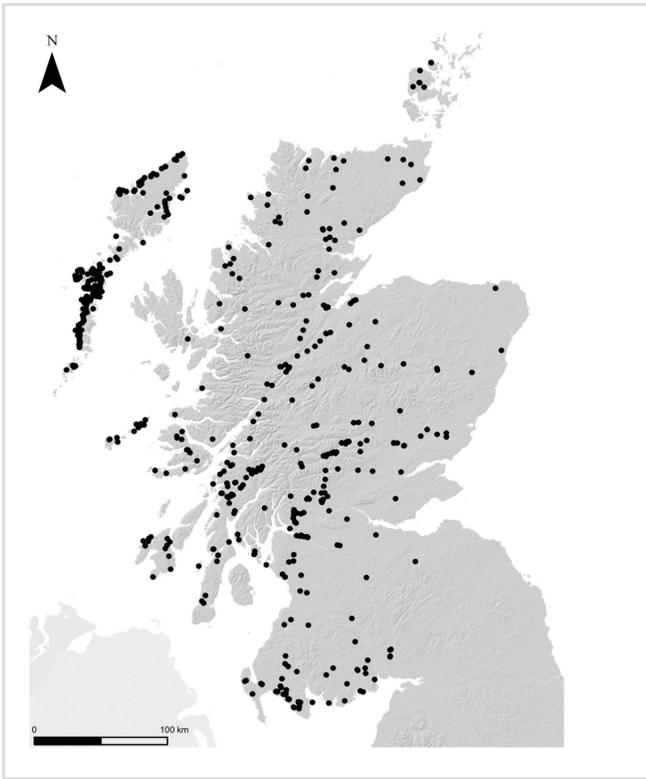


Figure 8. Distribution of crannogs in Scotland. (After Garrow and Sturt, 2019, p. 665.)

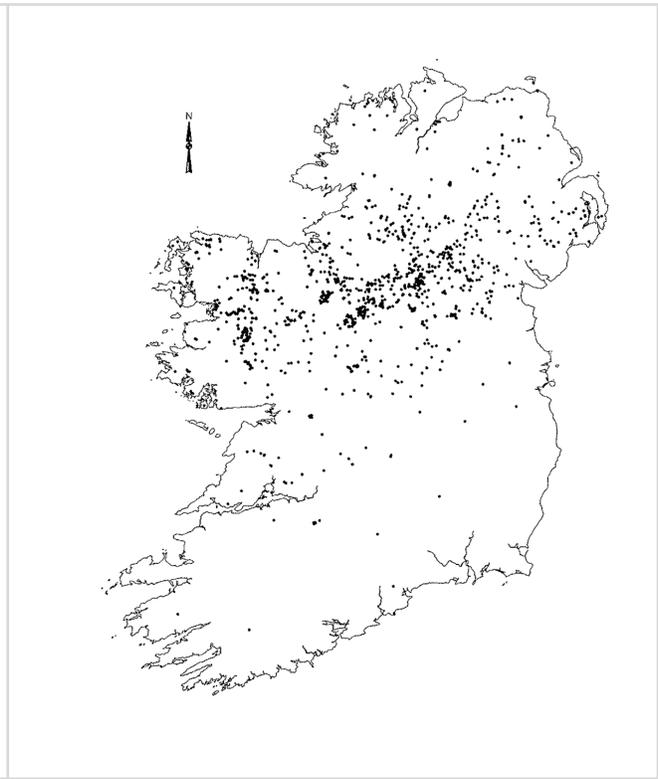


Figure 9. Distribution of crannogs in Ireland. (After O'Sullivan, 2000, p. 12.)

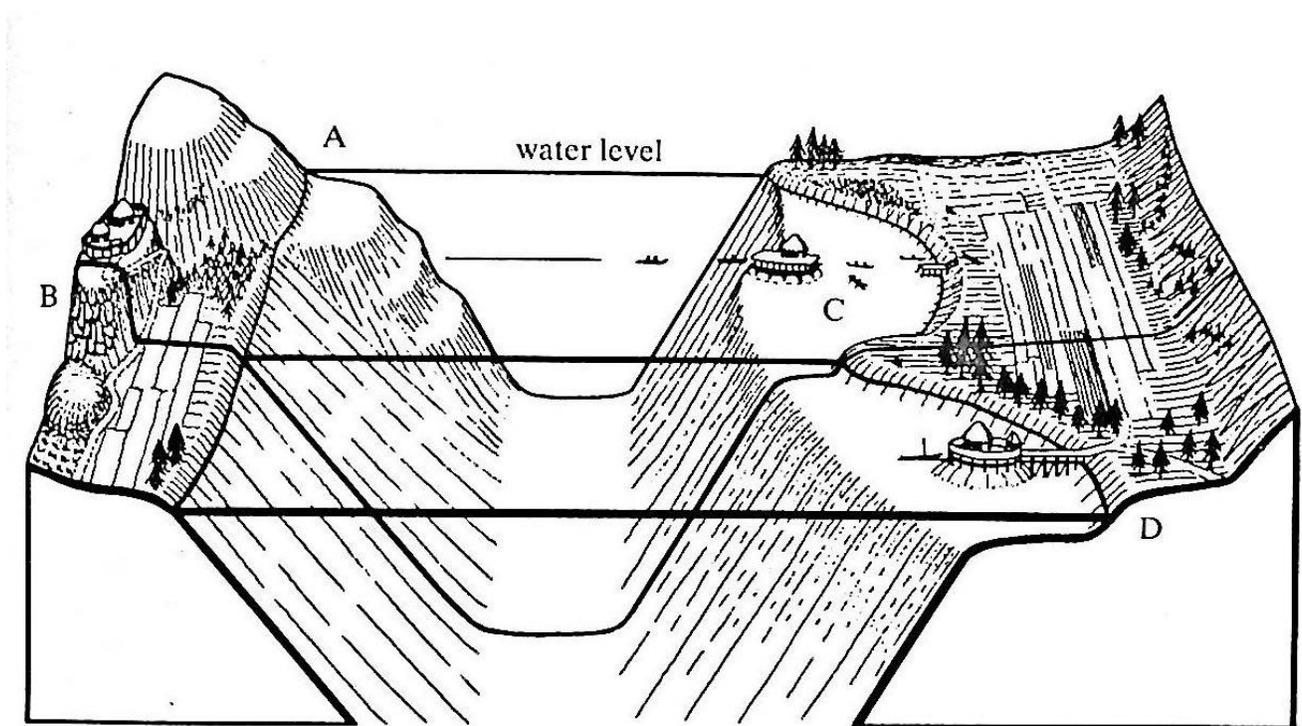


Figure 10. Site A: no agricultural land ashore but water is shallow; B: good land but water too deep; C: offshore location with shallow water and good land; D: inshore location with shallow water and good land (close enough for a causeway). After Morrison, 1985, p. 65.

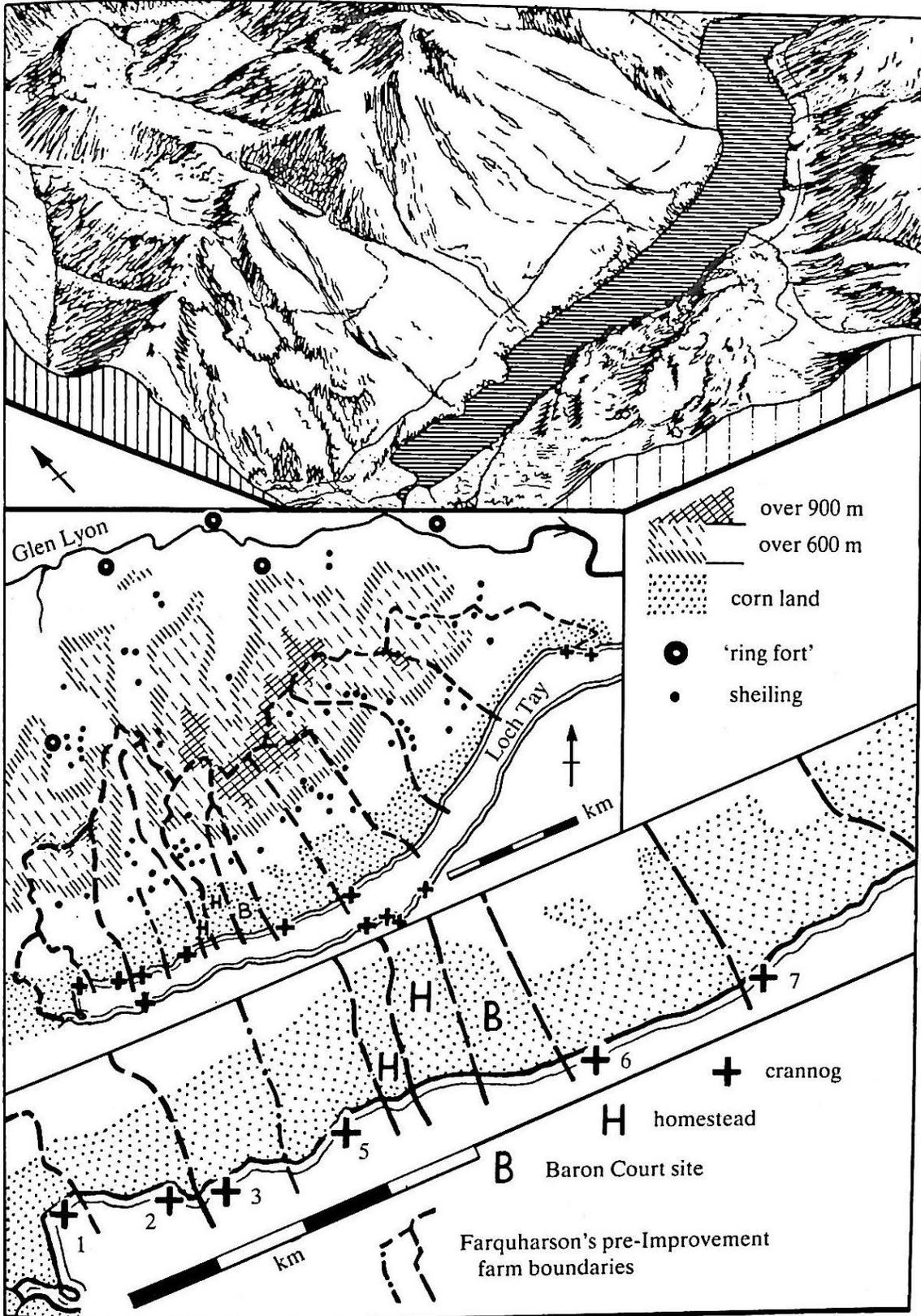


Figure 11. Sometimes crannogs appear to correlate with land boundaries. After Morrison, 1985, p. 79.

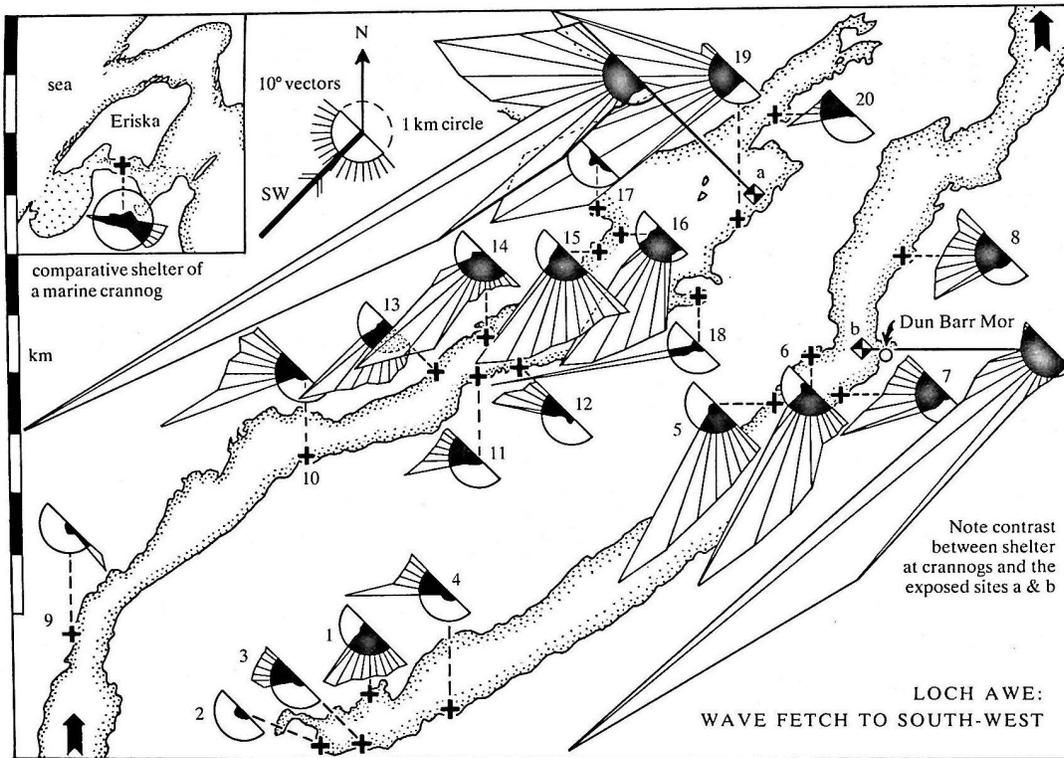


Figure 12. A study examining the locations of crannogs in Loch Awe, Scotland, with regard to how sheltered they are from prevailing wind and wave action. They tend to be mostly fairly sheltered. After Morrison, 1985, p. 63.

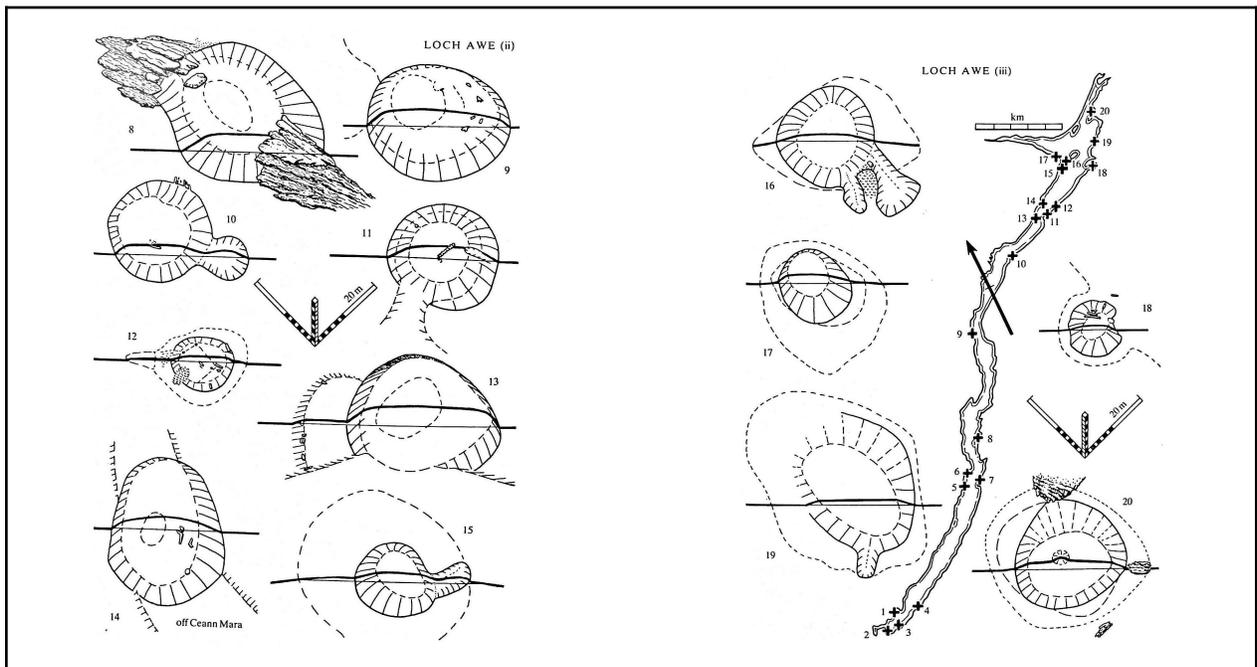


Figure 13. Diagrams of some Scottish crannog mounds showing size and profile. After Morrison, 1985, pp. 32-33.



Figure 14. Crannog with a zig-zag causeway connecting it to the shoreline [arrow added by author]. (After Buckley in O'Sullivan, 1998, p. 134.)

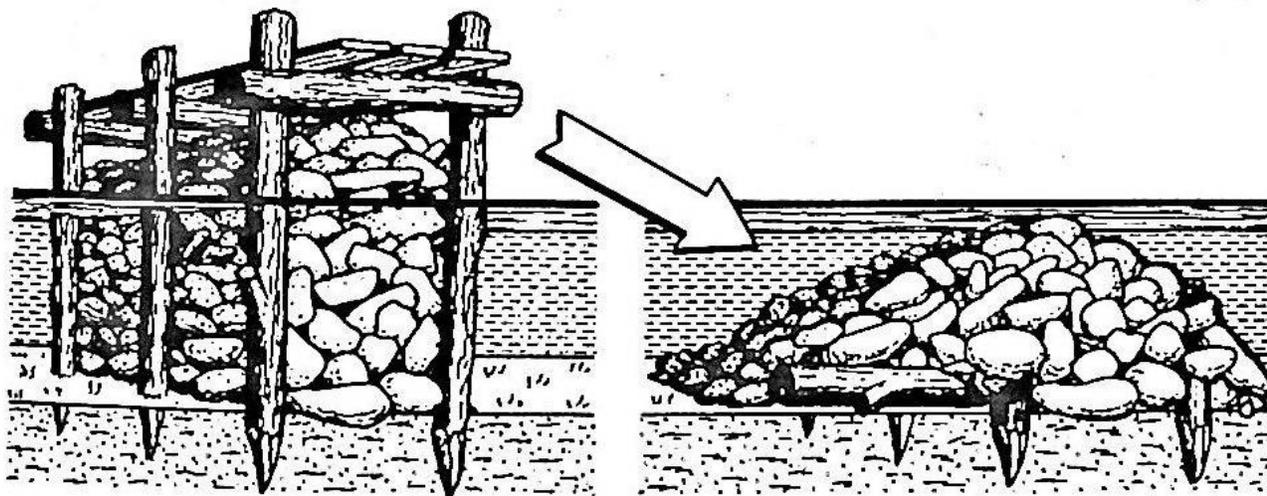


Figure 15. Piles of stones are rather hard to traverse by foot. Those crannogs that did have causeways likely had them above the water's surface. After Morrison, 1985, p. 55.

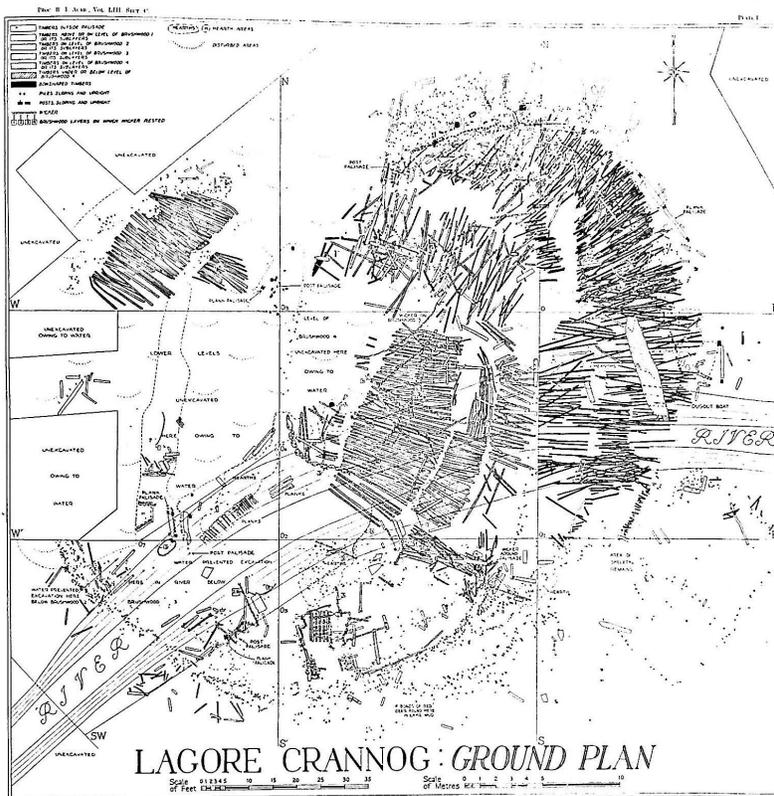
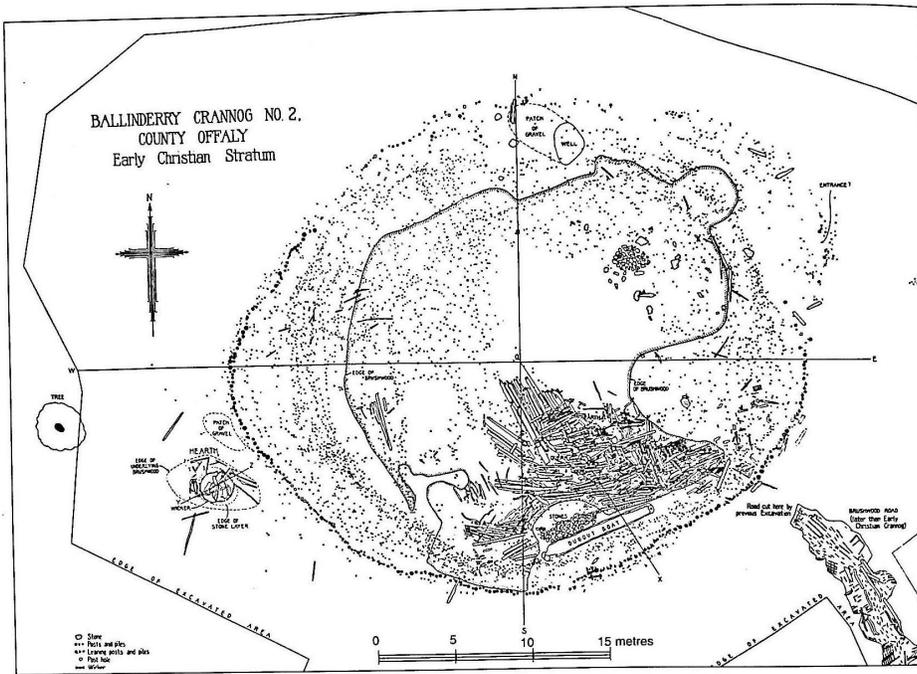


Figure 16. Archaeological drawings from two early crannog excavations. It should be clearly evident that these structures can be quite complex.



Figure 17. Interpretation can be hard! A structure from the crannog at Cults Loch. After Cavers, 2012, p. 180.



Figure 18. Drumclay, the most recently excavated crannog. Uncredited photo on various websites.

Selected Treasures

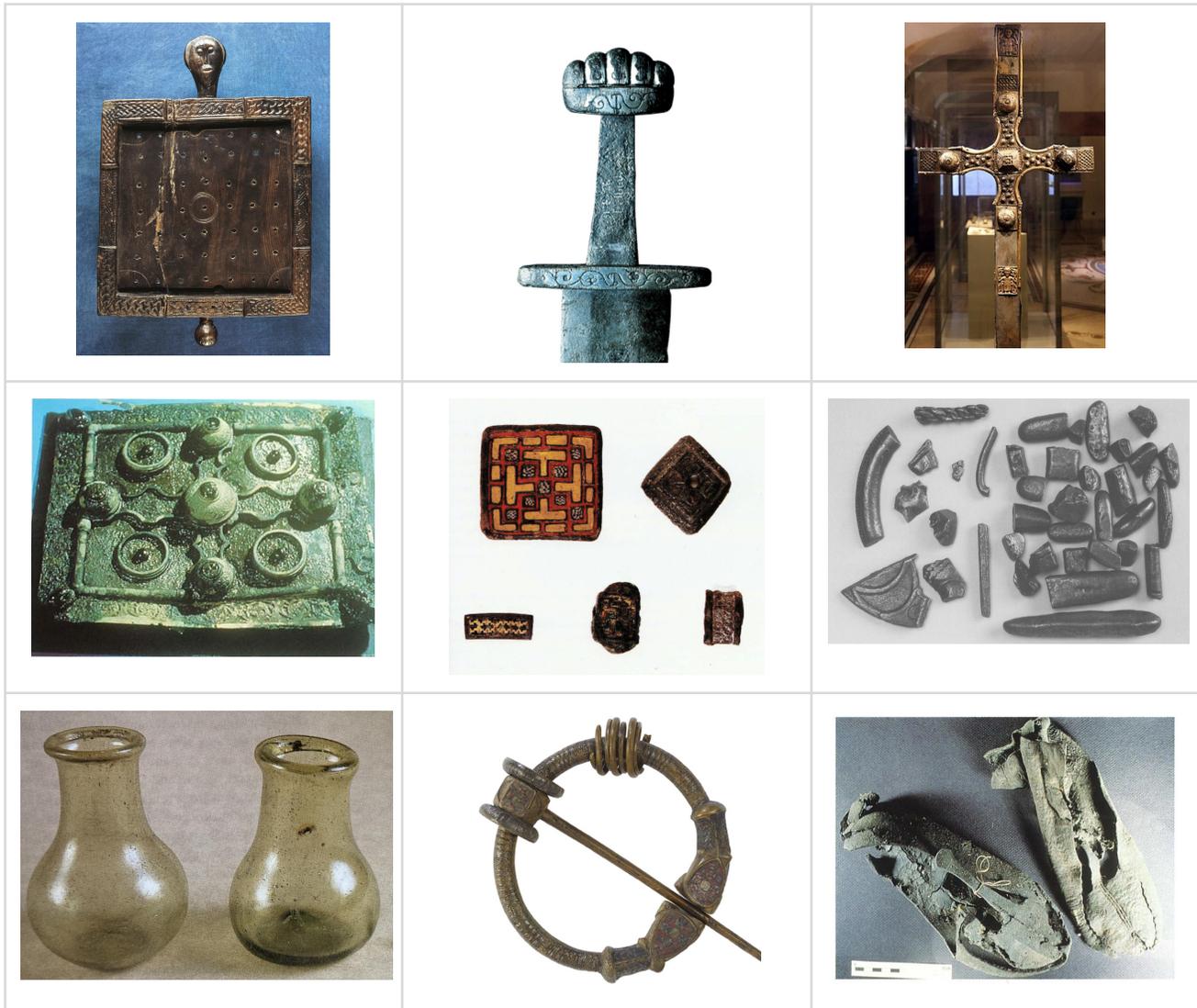


Figure 19. Various items (not to scale) that have been found on or next to crannogs. Some artifacts are perhaps less intrinsically valuable, but nevertheless priceless to people interested in early shoes or gaming boards, for example, such as shown here.

Items and sources (top to bottom, left to right):

1. Ballinderry gaming board: <https://bit.ly/3MYQ99h>
2. Ballinderry sword: <https://100objects.ie/ballinderry-sword/>
3. Tully Lough cross: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tully_Lough_Cross
4. Lough Kinale book shrine: O'Sullivan, 2000, p. 30.
5. Coolure Demesne enameled mounts: O'Sullivan et al., 2007, p. 35.
6. Ballywillan silver hoard: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20790128>
7. Moynagh Lough Merovingian glass vessels: O'Sullivan, 1998, p. 140.
8. Ballinderry brooch: <https://100objects.ie/ballinderry-brooch>
9. Lough Gara shoes: O'Sullivan, 2000, p. 29.

Reconstructions



Figure 20. Oakbank, a crannog reconstruction in Loch Tay, Scotland. Unfortunately, this structure suffered a significant fire, destroying it in 2021. Image credit: Christine Westerback via Wikimedia Commons.



Figure 21. Irish National Heritage Park's large multi-house exhibit. Photo by author.



Figure 22. Craggaunowen, a reconstructed crannog in Ireland. Screen grab from a 1984 from RTÉ Archives at <https://bit.ly/2JzPFaU>.



Figure 23. The latest reconstruction, the Welsh Crannog Centre, is not based on the neighboring crannog, but on a 19th-century depiction of a Scottish site. Image credit: MARC/BBNP via <https://bit.ly/3QpuNoc>.

Special Note: in 2014 a crannog at Drumclay, Northern Ireland, was excavated extensively. Although the work is not yet published, many web pages from that time provide photos and various details about what was uncovered. This includes 6,000 artifacts; a 1,000-year period of usage; both square and round houses; evidence for 30 houses (presumably sequential), etc. Example web sites: <https://bit.ly/3aSDQxO>, <https://bbc.in/3ObZwmP>, and <https://bit.ly/3NTxFZ8>, or just use a search engine to look for articles on Drumclay crannog. Hopefully their work will be published soon.

Further Reading [with some comments]; several are available online for free, some URLs have been converted to shortened versions:

Catling, C. 2017. "The Palace in the Lake" in *Current Archaeology* 364. [Short article about the Welsh crannog, with good photos. <https://bit.ly/3MNVQvp>]

Cavers, G. 2012. "Crannogs as Buildings: the Evolution of Interpretation 1882 - 2011" in Midgley & Sanders, pp. 169-188. [Interesting discussion about possible uses of crannogs, the interpretation of their house structures, and aspects of water veneration.]

Crone, A. 2012. "Forging a Chronological Framework for Scottish Crannogs; The Radiocarbon and Dendrochronological Evidence" in Midgley & Sanders, pp. 139-168. [Interesting study discussing apparent pulses of crannog building and occupation, possibly related to world-wide environment changes.]

Fredengren, C. 2001. "Poor People's Crannogs" in *Archaeology Ireland* 15.4, pp. 24-25. [A reminder that not all crannogs are full of luxury items associated with the elite.]

Fredengren, C. 2002. *Crannogs: a Study of People's Interaction With Lakes, With Particular Reference to Lough Gara In the North-West of Ireland*. Wordwell, Ireland. [The most recent thorough examination of the subject matter, but rather academic and can be tough reading. <https://bit.ly/3MYQTey>]

Garrow, D. and F. Sturt. 2019. "Neolithic crannogs: rethinking settlement, monumentality and deposition in the Outer Hebrides and beyond" in *Antiquity* 93, pp. 664-684. [Very recent publication showing that at least a half-dozen crannogs in the Outer Hebrides date back to the Neolithic, often with accompanying intact pottery on the adjacent lake bottom. <https://bit.ly/3OdolcU>]

Graham-Campbell, J. and J. Sheehan. 2009 "Viking Age Gold and Silver from Irish Crannogs and Other Watery Places" in *The Journal of Irish Archaeology* 18, pp. 77-93. [Observations on silver hoards and other finds. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20790128>]

Lane, A. and M. Redknap. 2020. *Llangorse Crannog: The Excavation of an Early Medieval Royal Site in the Kingdom of Brycheiniog*. Oxbow Books, U.K. [If you want to know about Wales' crannog, this is your source. Very recent publication covering this unique crannog in detail.]

Midgley, M. and J. Sanders, eds. 2012. *Lake Dwellings after Robert Munro*. Sidestone Press, Leiden. [A collection of academic papers, some of which cover how research has changed opinions about crannogs since the late 1800s.]

Morrison, I. 1985. *Landscape with lake dwellings: the crannogs of Scotland*. Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh. [Probably the best introductory book on the subject matter and easiest to obtain. Possibly a bit dated in some aspects. Not long, easy to read, with many illustrations and photos.]

Munro, R. 1882. *Ancient Scottish Lake-Dwellings or Crannogs*. David Douglas: Edinburgh. [One of the original pair of late 19th-century antiquarian books (see also Wood-Martin) with many illustrations of early finds. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/52339>]

O'Sullivan, A. 1998. *The Archaeology of Lake Settlement in Ireland: Discovery Programme Monographs 4*. Royal Irish Academy, Ireland. [Very good coverage of the whole subject, probably the best book for a serious non-academic reader, but relatively pricey.]

O'Sullivan, A. 2000. *Crannogs: Lake-dwellings of early Ireland*. Country House, Dublin. [A short, comprehensive, popular summary with many color images but may be hard to obtain.]

O'Sullivan, A. and T. Nicholl. 2010. "Early medieval settlement enclosures in Ireland: dwellings, daily life and social identity" in *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 111C, pp. 59–90. [Covers some current thinking on aspects of daily life, including the possible importance and emphasis of period concern with entrances and boundaries of sites and their social importance.]

O'Sullivan, A., R. Sands, and E. Kelly. 2007. *Coolure Demesne Crannog, Lough Derravaragh: an introduction to its archaeology and landscape*. Wordwell, Ireland. [Illustrations of finds discovered during a modern archaeological examination as well as consideration of this crannog in a larger setting.]

Wood-Martin, W. 1886. *The Lake Dwellings of Ireland, Or ancient lacustrine habitations of Erin, commonly called crannogs*. Hodges, Figgis & Co., Dublin. [One of the original pair of late 19th-century antiquarian books (see also Munro) with many illustrations of early finds. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/49313>]