

As revealed in Andersonstown News some months ago the new outer ring road for West Belfast will be cutting through a ringfort, or rath, dating, presumably, from the Early Christian Period. The new road, running northwards from the present Monagh Road/Springfield Road roundabout through the fields at the foot of Black Mountain, finds itself contained in a narrow corridor between the steep hillslopes and the various housing estates and right in its path lies the ringfort.

On the surface raths appear as circular grass-grown earth banks with a ditch on the outside, the latter now usually filled up. The average diameter of such raths is 120 feet with the space enclosed normally flat or slightly dished and tilted towards an entrance marked by a solid causeway across the ditch and a corresponding gap in the bank. The Ballymurphy example conforms to this pattern except that it stands up prominently being elevated about three feet above the level of the field and would thus be described as a platform-type rath.

Early editions of the Six Inch Ordnance Survey maps shows raths as extremely numerous in the Irish countryside but farm improvements and rural developments have greatly reduced former numbers. This is particularly the case in the vicinity of Belfast where out of around twenty such sites which once existed in the western sector of the city the Ballymurphy example is the only one which survives in anything like undisturbed condition. Accordingly it has been decided to mount an excavation to record as much information as possible in advance of the site's destruction. Although many larger and apparently more complex sites lie undisturbed throughout the countryside the rath at Ballymurphy is to be given priority because of its proximity



perhaps of several phases, it will enable a more complete picture of the way of life at the time to be built up. The emphasis of the rath dwellers on the defensive aspects of their settlements shows that personal security (from warlike neighbours, other groups of people, wild animals?) was an important preoccupation at the time when Ireland

FORTHCOMING EXCAVATION NEAR BALLYMURPHY

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to the large centre of population and therefore possibly greater potential public interest and because whatever evidence it contains will be shortly irrevocably lost.

To the present approximately 100 raths have been excavated (some on a very small scale) and almost half of them have been in the North of Ireland. Although there is still considerable controversy about the origins of this type of field monument (where, when, why, and by whom the first examples were constructed and about how long they may have continued in use into the mediaeval period) the majority of sites so far excavated have been dated reasonably securely to the Early Christian Period, that is, approximately 600 to 1100 A.D. The archaeologist in east Ulster has the advantage of the occurrence of finding pieces of coarse pottery of this period, a happening which does not occur elsewhere in Ireland.

The evidence so far uncovered from rath excavations indicates that they were defensive enclosures built around simple, commonly wooden, farmsteads some of which contained outbuildings and well-defined yards for stabling cattle. The details of the plans uncovered from any 'dig' naturally depend on the complexity of the structures originally built, the extent to which they have left traces in the soil, the amount of subsequent disturbance and the scale and care of the excavation itself. Some sites on examination have unfortunately revealed no traces of structures of occupation and are thus thought to have been simply cattle enclosures. It is hoped that the Ballymurphy rath will turn out to be more rewarding.

If the site does reveal good evidence for occupation, both in terms of structural evidence and small finds, per-

was presumably enjoying fairly stable internal political and social structures. Certainly the unrest portrayed by the defended settlements cannot all be blamed on such as the Vikings, or Norsemen, as a small rath-type fort would be of little avail in resisting such marauders.

Underground stone-built refuges, sometimes called 'caves' but known to antiquarians as 'souterrains' were also built in great numbers throughout County Antrim, frequently in raths. The Ballymurphy site may well contain a souterrain as did several of the other, now vanished, raths on the hills to the west of Belfast.

The excavation is planned to begin at the end of July and will continue for a month or six weeks depending on findings. A team of men recruited through Enterprise Ulster and a small group of students under the direction of Mr. Christopher Lynn of the Archaeological Survey will be employed. The progress and eventual completion of the work will depend on good local relations as the excavation can only be worthwhile if it can proceed in a well-ordered and scientific manner. The careful recording of results necessitates the temporary preservation of fragile structures exposed in the ground and the continued availability of equipment. It is then hoped that vandalism will in no way spoil what promises to be a last opportunity to learn something of how the earliest inhabitants of Black Mountain lived, whatever finds may be uncovered are purely of archaeological interest and of no monetary value.

Whilst the excavation is in progress visitors to the site will be welcomed though it is understandable and essential that their presence does not impede the students and other work