BATTLE AND SIEGE MAPS OF ELIZABETHAN IRELAND:
BLUEPRINTS FOR ARCHAEOLOGISTS?

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ABSTRACT

During the reign of Elizabeth I (1558–1603), the English Crown engaged in a series of bloody wars in Ireland. Principally fought against local Gaelic Irish and Anglo-Irish lords, these conflicts paved the way for the plantation and colonisation of the late 16th and 17th centuries. As the fighting raged, surveyors, cartographers and engineers produced maps of key locations throughout the country. These were created principally to aid the military effort, but were also designed to provide interested parties in England with a visual reference for events.

This paper will examine one form of this map production, namely the numerous battle and siege maps drawn throughout the period. It will explore the potential accuracy of the depictions, and suggest methods for correctly ‘reading’ these primary documents. The importance of critically examining the maps against other primary sources and the topographical landscape will be discussed, suggesting a methodology for how this resource can be utilised by conflict archaeologists. In addition, it will demonstrate through a number of examples how these research techniques can be successfully applied.

Introduction: The Siege and Battle Maps

A large number of military maps were created in Ireland during the wars of the 16th and early 17th centuries. Many were designed to assist in planning English troop movements and strategy, while further examples illustrated freshly constructed forts and defensive positions. A significant sub-group of these military maps feature representations of sieges and battles that took place throughout the island, and of these, the majority date from the period of the Nine Years War (1594–1603). Today, these maps are spread across different archives in the United Kingdom and Ireland, making it difficult for the archaeologist to readily gain access to them.

Examples of the maps can be found in repositories such as the National Library of Ireland, Trinity College Library Dublin, the Public Record Office Kew, the British Library, the National Maritime Museum, Hatfield House and Lambeth Palace Library. Only rarely have reproductions been drawn together in published form. Perhaps the first instance of this is the 1633 publication by Thomas Stafford entitled Pacata Hibernia, the ‘Pacification of Ireland’, which dealt principally with the Nine Years War in Munster. Many of the maps utilised in this work were copied from the Carew papers, manuscripts
relating to Sir George Carew, Lord President of Munster at the time of the war. Among the siege and battle maps depicted are the Earl of Essex’s siege of Cahir Castle in 1599, the siege and battle of Kinsale in 1601, and the siege of Dunboy Castle in 1602. In the later 20th century, a number of 16th and 17th century maps have been drawn together in publications such as Hayes-McCoy’s *Ulster and Other Irish Maps* and Swift’s *Historical Maps of Ireland*, although only a small number of the images presented are siege and battle maps. A comprehensive catalogue of all early Irish modern maps is yet to be published Dunlop’s 1905 listing has come closest to achieving this, although he restricted himself to pre-1600 works and was unaware of the existence of some important collections (Andrews 2001: 153).

As has been mentioned, the majority of these Elizabethan siege and battle maps are from the period of the Nine Years War. There are some notable exceptions, such as the engagement at Dún An Óir in 1580, mapped to commemorate the defeat of the first foreign force to land in Ireland during the period. Within the Nine Years War itself, many of the more important engagements are represented, which, apart from those discussed above, include clashes such as the Siege of Enniskillen Castle (1593) the Battle of the Erne Fords (1593) and the Battle of the Yellow Ford (1598). Together, these maps provide an invaluable resource for conflict archaeologists attempting to locate the archaeological remnants of these events on the ground.

The principal catalyst for the creation of these siege and battle maps remains unclear. While the production of many of the military maps of Ireland during the period can be explained by the military needs of the ongoing wars, the battle and siege maps are retrospective in nature. The majority were created principally as a means of information, but they may also have aided tactical development as the conflict progressed. What is apparent is that a tradition of producing these colourful reference points developed in the Elizabethan period, but does not seem to have continued into conflicts such as those which engulfed the island in the 1640s. It was during the period of the Elizabethan administration that they reached their zenith. One potential factor in their creation was Sir William Cecil, Lord Burghley, Secretary of State and chief advisor to Queen Elizabeth I. His love of maps is well documented, and he amassed an important private collection. It is known that he had maps of Ireland commissioned, particularly with a view to aiding English military efforts in the country (Smyth 2006: 31–32).

The men who produced the military maps often travelled the countryside with the English troops, and it is clear that many were present at the sieges and battles that they illustrated, sometimes sketching events as they unfolded. Perhaps the most famous of these was Richard Bartlett (Barthelet), a surveyor