



Left: **View of Faughart Hill from south-east.**

Below right: **Modern statue of St Brigid at Faughart Shrine.**

Bottom left: **View from Faughart Hill, eastwards towards the Cooley Mountains.**

Location

Faughart Hill is c. 4km north of the town of Dundalk. At 133m OD it is a relatively low hill and hardly seems significant when viewed from the Ballymascanlan roundabout on the main Belfast–Dublin road, but its strategic location, commanding a number of passes through the Fews Mountains of south Armagh, has given it an added archaeological and historical significance—a meeting-place of history, mythology, religion and ritual. The best-known pass through the mountains is that called ‘the Gap of the North’, famed in the *Táin Bó Cúailnge*. From the summit of Faughart Hill there are extensive views southwards over the Plains of Muirthemne and beyond Mount Oriel and Collon, eastwards towards the Cooley Peninsula and Dundalk Bay, and south-westwards towards Slane and Lough Crew.

Place-name

The name Faughart is linked to the ancient tales relating the legendary feats of the mythological hero Cú Chulainn. One suggested etymology is that the name may derive from *Focherd Muirthemne*, ‘the good cast of Muirthemne’, referring to a story that Cú Chulainn had cast a split holly tree that hit Ferbaeth, his foster-brother, in the back of the neck, passing through and out of his mouth. Another suggestion is that the name derives from *Focerd*, ‘the good art’, referring to another Cú Chulainn tale in which the Ulster hero kills fourteen men in single combat.

The St Brigid connection

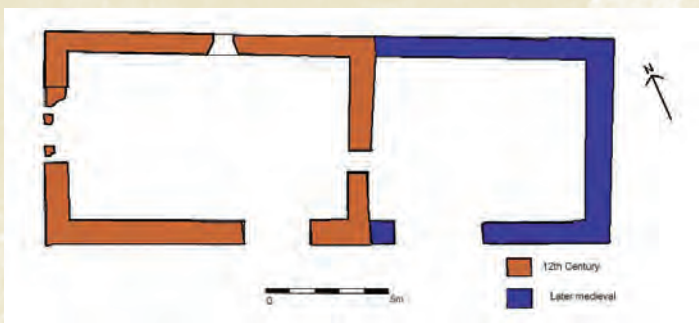
Tradition holds that Faughart is the birthplace of one of Ireland’s earliest and most iconic saints, Brigid. Daithí Ó hÓgain records that the earliest reference to Brigid survives from c. AD 600 and is connected to an origin-story of the Fotharta sept, a Leinster tribe based in Kildare. The Life of Brigid, the *Vita Brigidae*, compiled c. 650 by the cleric Cogitosus, contains a list of miracles (some of which are associated with Faughart) and a description of Kildare as an ecclesiastical centre. St Brigid’s feast-day was known as *Oímelg* or *Imbolc* (1 February), and stories of the saint clearly portray her as a patroness of livestock and of crops.

Veneration of Brigid is still very strong in the Faughart area. The church on Faughart Hill is dedicated to Brigid, and the nearby well is still a place of veneration and activity. To the west of the hill are Stations of the Cross, a grotto and shrines dedicated to St Brigid, laid out along the course of a small stream, which still attract numerous visitors to offer penance, carry out devotions and seek cures.

Sites on the hill

Faughart Hill itself is a drumlin formation, roughly oval in plan, with a ridge extending in an east–west direction and currently traversed by a road. Two archaeological sites, a mound and the church, are located on the ridge of the hill near the summit and can be seen in profile from a considerable distance in the surrounding area. A souterrain has been recorded near the motte. Furthermore, aerial photography has provided evidence for significant sites on the hill that are no longer visible at ground level. The first is a large enclosure around the church and graveyard; the second is the cropmark of a large subcircular enclosure south-east of the church. Ringforts are located around the periphery of the hill at lower contours.

The church



The church, constructed of large granite boulders and thin slabs of greywacke, is a relatively small medieval structure consisting of a nave and chancel, resulting from at least two phases of construction. The building bears evidence for various episodes of repair and consolidation. A gap on the west gable may mark the location of an original doorway. On the south of the cross-wall dividing the nave and chancel there is evidence for a door-jamb. The north end of this cross-wall is bonded to the north wall of the church. The chancel, however, is later than the nave as it butts against the north wall. Sweetman states that the type of construction and a window embrasure visible on the north wall indicate that the church is likely to date from the twelfth century.

A series of small investigative excavations carried out by Lil O’Connor in 1966 have provided some insights into the nature of some of the features in the graveyard and the church itself. O’Connor had also excavated a number of cuttings both inside and outside the walls of the church to investigate the origins of the building.

The cuttings across the church walls show that they rest on hard boulder clay and that the lower courses were unmortared. There was evidence that the west wall rests on an occupation layer that contained a sherd of coarse pottery dating from the twelfth century or earlier.

A portion of an undated cist burial was discovered outside the west wall at a level that appears to pre-date the foundation courses of the church. The cist is aligned east–west; when the covering stone was lifted, the undisturbed foot bones of a single inhumation could be seen. Visual inspection of the remainder of the cist did not identify any grave-goods or other artefacts.



St Brigid’s Well

The well within the churchyard, 20m north-west of the north wall of the church, is still venerated today, as evidenced by the rags and other objects attached to nearby trees. It is thought that the well is filled with water that runs off the surrounding churchyard rather than representing an underground spring. Steps lead down into the rectangular stone-built sump, c. 2m beneath the surrounding ground level, that contains the water. The well-house is accessed by a series of stone-built steps; it has an unusual ‘conical’ appearance on the outside and is partially corbel-built on the inside.



St Brigid’s Pillar

Another prominent feature within the graveyard is St Brigid’s Pillar, a squarish granite block with a flat top in which there is a tenon joint that most likely served as the socket for a high cross. Currently a small carved cross of recent origins is propped up in the socket.

The pillar stands roughly at the centre of a circular mound (5.5m in diameter) whose edges are defined by well-fashioned curved granite slabs. O’Connor’s trench across this mound indicated that the pillar stone and a kerbstone rested on soil that had been disturbed by modern burials. A fragment of modern pottery was recovered from directly underneath the pillar stone, indicating that the pillar must have been relocated to this position within the graveyard in modern times.

Left: **Portion of south wall of church.**

Above: **St Brigid’s Well.**



Cross fragment

Around ten years ago an interesting fragment of what may have been a high cross was recovered during the restoration of a small portion of the graveyard wall. The fragment (34cm by 31cm) consists of a portion of carved granite, representing the central part of a small high cross. On one side there is a prominent boss, 10cm in diameter, extending c. 6cm proud of the granite surface. The decoration on the other side consists of a circular area, 14cm in diameter, defined by a ring 2cm wide, with a central ‘cupmark’. This fragment is now held in Dundalk Museum.



St Brigid’s Bed

O’Connor excavated another trench across a second prominent feature, which had traditionally been used as a penitential station. This consists of a horseshoe-shaped bank of earth with a square-shaped pillar stone at each side of the entrance. A large, flat ‘black stone’ was found to occupy the central area of the feature, and there was evidence for stones lining the inner face of the bank to the north.



Far left: **St Brigid’s Pillar at centre of mound.**

Below left: **Possible high cross fragment (front and back).**

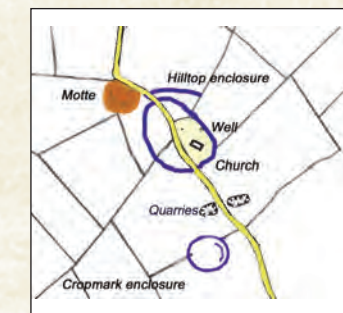
Bottom left: **St Brigid’s Bed.**

Left: **Aerial view showing church and graveyard, motte and cropmark enclosures (CUCAP).**

Hilltop enclosure

An aerial photograph taken by Keith St Joseph in 1965 has provided further evidence for earlier enclosure on Faughart Hill. The photo shows cropmarks in the fields surrounding the church. The boundary of the present graveyard lies along the course of a much larger subsurface enclosure, roughly oval in plan and measuring 150m by 130m, which is bisected by the road. There is evidence for the remains of another ditch in the ploughed field to the north of the graveyard. While only a small section of this can be seen in the photograph, it may have formed another, outer enclosure encircling the summit of the hill.

Such large enclosures would have formed part of the layout of monastic sites in the Early Christian period. A purely defensive role for a double-ramparted hilltop enclosure cannot be ruled out, however. Such multivallate hillforts in Ireland are increasingly dated to the late Bronze Age, c. 1000 BC.



The motte

The motte, an impressive monument in its own right, is located 180m north of the church on the opposite side of the road. It is one of three possible examples in this part of north County Louth. Marked ‘tumulus’ on the Ordnance Survey maps, it occupies the summit of the hill at a height of 113m, with commanding views to the south, west and north. It consists of a large earthen mound up to 8m high, circular in plan, with diameters of 15.6m at the summit and 38m at the base, which is surrounded by a flat-bottomed fosse, 5–6m wide and up to 1.5m deep. There is evidence that the face of the ditch was lined with drystone walling.

Thomas Wright, in *Louthiana*, his renowned book on antiquities in County Louth (published in 1758), shows an octagonal stone-built structure on the summit and two ramps giving access to the top. A portion of one of the walls of this structure is still visible. The age of the building is unclear, but Wright suggested that it might date from Lord Mountjoy’s campaigns in this area in the early seventeenth century.