

Turning Stone into Bread: Millstone Quarries in Post-Medieval Ireland.

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Post-medieval millstones survive to the present day in large numbers. Hence they are a key but to date unrecognised source of information on trade and communication flows as “particular sources of rock became widely known for the suitability of their product for millstones, having the necessary qualities of hardness, coarseness and toughness” (Tucker, 1982, 191). It is possible to track millstones back to particular areas and quarries where the evidence of the formation of this industry is still visible in the form of broken and unfinished millstones and the circular ‘dishes’ or ‘scars’ from where they were extracted. The transformation of natural stone into cultural artefacts as monolithic millstones was a decisive component in the local economy of such areas with a suitable geology.

The central aim of the proposed paper is to provide a detailed understanding of the millstone industry, and in a wider context to contribute to the study of stone working and its place within the cultural history of post-medieval Ireland. It has two components; the discussion of an island-wide distribution of 45 millstone quarries and assessment of two regional case studies located in the Mourne Mountains, Co. Down and Waterford Harbour, situated in the northeast and southeast of the island of Ireland respectively.

The establishment of a national distribution of millstone quarries provides a platform on which to answer such questions as the sources of stone used. This will be followed by discussion of field-based investigation which will focus on research questions concerning geology, transport, typology, what techniques were used to transform a “rough-out” piece and the role individual quarries played in the overall industrialisation of millstone production. As such, these research topics adhere to the themes of movement, trade and engagement of and with stone referred to by the organisers of this conference.

Bibliography

Tucker, D.G. 1982. Millstones north and south of the Scottish border. *Industrial Archaeology Review*, vol. 6, no.3, 186-193.