

The Later Medieval Usage of Crannogs in Ireland

Die spätmittelalterliche Nutzung von Crannogs in Irland

Le rôle des Crannógs en Irlande au Bas Moyen Âge

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Abstract

The traditional appreciation of crannogs in Ireland is that these substantial high status lake dwellings on manmade islands functioned during the period before c. 1100 AD. More recently, a changing view argues for their continued usage and indeed construction during the period after 1100, when much of Ireland was under the central authority of the Angevin crown. This paper sets out the baseline information upon which the alternative appreciation is founded, and considers the implications that emerge for the broader understanding of ethnicity and lordship in later medieval Ireland. A selection of key sites is made, including Island MacHugh in Co. Tyrone, Cró Inis, Co. Westmeath, Ballywillin, Co. Longford, and Ardakillen, Co. Roscommon. In each instance, significant later medieval occupation horizons have been identified above those levels of pre-1100 AD activity. Such sites are not exclusive to the traditional Gaelic areas of later medieval Ireland, and occur within the Anglo-Norman colonial zone as well. The paper concludes that the acceptance of such evidence as an integral part of the later medieval material culture of Ireland will in turn present a situation where scholars can begin to understand more clearly and more constructively the ways in which Gaelic lordship was manifested and displayed. The Discovery Programme is currently working on this issue in Co. Roscommon, and over the next few years will seek to contribute to broader discussions of the indigenous cultures within and alongside the Angevin empire in other parts of Europe.

Introduction

The general tendency amongst Irish scholars over the last century or so has been to view crannogs as being primarily a feature of the early medieval landscape of Ireland (for example, *Edwards 1990*, 34–41; *Kelly 1991a*; *1991b*; *Lynn 1983*, 50–51; *Ó Riordáin 1942*, 89–99; *De Paor – De Paor 1958*, 84–86). Yet the first major study of this lake-based, man-made, palisaded and dispersed settlement type in Ireland was published by Colonel Wood-Martin of Sligo in 1886, and this work clearly indicated that many crannogs continued to be occupied and even built by Gaelic Irish lords throughout the high and late medieval periods (*Wood-Martin 1886*, 146–156). However this post twelfth-century usage of crannogs was ignored or

downplayed for much of the twentieth century. Scholarly emphasis was placed instead on the supposed origins and roles of crannogs in the early medieval period (see *O’Sullivan 1998*, 207; *2001*, 397). More recent work by archaeologists has reminded Irish archaeology that crannogs continued to be used long after the end of the early medieval period right down to the seventeenth century (*O’Conor 1998*, 79–85; *O’Sullivan 1998*, 152–155, 167–176; *Fredengren 2002*, 265–276, 282, 287). Yet despite this work, we have noted a tendency amongst certain of our colleagues, particularly settlement historians but also some archaeologists, to downplay this evidence for the usage of crannogs in Gaelic-dominated parts of both high and late medieval Ireland. For example, an analysis of Tadhg O’Keeffe’s generally excellent book *Medieval Ireland – an Archaeology*, published in 2000 and used today as a textbook by Irish universities, shows that he devotes only one single sentence in it to the later medieval usage of crannogs by Gaelic dynasts (*O’Keeffe 2000*, 24). Instead, much space is devoted to the Gaelic Irish adoption of castles during the high medieval period, particularly their supposed usage of mottes (*O’Keeffe 2000*, 26–29). O’Keeffe also states but does not prove (admitting that there is little archaeological evidence at present to support his views) that the high medieval Gaelic Irish also had large open fields (implying large-scale arable agriculture) and built and lived in English Midlands-type nucleated villages (*O’Keeffe 2000*, 25–26, 62).

To answer this question about the reluctance of some scholars to discuss the high and late medieval usage of crannogs in Gaelic Ireland, let us look at the intellectual framework within which we believe the whole question of the nature of settlement in high medieval and indeed late medieval Gaelic Ireland has taken place (c. 1100–1380 and c. 1380–1600 AD respectively). It is clear that there was one school of historical thought in the last century that tended to see high medieval Ireland, both before and after 1169, as conservative, insular, chaotic, tribal and backward – far removed from the contemporary, and so-called ‘feudal’ (to use that now-questionable term in its most general sense; *Reynolds 1994*) lands of the Anglo-Norman dominated parts of eastern Ireland and England which were regarded as developed and civilized. These historians, who included Goddard Orpen as author of the ground-breaking *Ireland under the Normans*,

