Housing in Later Medieval Gaelic Ireland

Hausbau im spätmittelalterlichen Irland

Construction des maisons en Irlande gaélique au Bas Moyen-Âge

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Introduction

Excavation has yielded much information over the years on the nature of housing in Mesolithic, Neolithic and Bronze Age Ireland (*Doody 2000*; *Grogan 1996*; *Waddell 1998*, 12-13, 31-42). Substantial work has also been carried out on the changes in house form seen during the early medieval period in Ireland (e.g. *Lynn 1978*). The great urban excavations of the last quarter-century or so in medieval cities like Dublin or Waterford have uncovered massive evidence for Hiberno-Norse houses of 10th-, 11th- and 12th-century date, as well as much information on dwellings of the succeeding Anglo-Norman period (e.g. *Coughlan 2000*; *Murray 1983*; *Scully 1998*; *Wallace 1992*). In comparison to England, however, surprisingly little archaeological work has been undertaken to date on later medieval rural settlement in Ireland (*O'Conor 1998*, 9-16). This is especially true of the parts of later medieval Ireland that in some way remained under the control of indigenous Gaelic-Irish lords (*Duffy - Edwards - FitzPatrick 2001*, 54-57; *O'Conor 2001*, 329-331). These Gaelic-dominated regions of later medieval Ireland included much of the western half of the country and areas of more marginal land in the east (*Glasscock 1987*, 225-226; *Nicholls 1972*, 13). This lack of archaeological work on rural settlement means that there is little excavated material to illustrate the types of houses that were to be found in the countryside of Ireland during the whole later medieval period from the 12th century through to c. 1600 or so. This lack of data is compounded by the fact that no later medieval vernacular building of timber or cob is known to be standing today in Ireland – totally unlike the situation in England and Wales.

The realization that so little is known about life in later medieval Gaelic Ireland prompted the Discovery Programme (the Republic's institute for full-time archaeological research) in 1999 to initiate a project that will hopefully eventually fill this gap in our knowledge of the island's past. Furthermore, the creation of new lectureships in medieval archaeology in virtually all the Irish universities since 1996 has meant that other, albeit less ambitious, projects are about to start that will also examine aspects of Gaelic Ireland down to the 17th century. The basic aim of this paper is to use the available excavated, literary, historical and cartographic evidence, limited as it is, to discuss the nature of the types of houses that seem to have occurred and been built in Gaelic-dominated regions of later medieval Ireland. It is hoped that this will be of some help to these projects, as questions about later medieval housing in Ireland will be identified for future research to answer.

Creats

Several hundred maps were made of various parts of Ireland between the second half of the 16th century and c. 1630, generally as part of the processes behind the Tudor and Jacobean reconquest of the island (e.g. *Andrews 2001*). In particular, those drawn by Richard Bartlett in Ulster around the year 1600 depict Gaelic-Irish housing in great detail – far more so and in greater quantity than any of his map-making contempories (*Hayes-McCoy 1964*; *Andrews 2001*, 165-167). His drawings are important because they show what the landscape of later medieval Ulster looked like before it was changed by the Ulster Plantation and the arrival of English and Lowland Scots settlers in the early 17th century. Hence these maps are of immense importance to archaeologists, historical geographers and historians. Two types of undefended house are commonly represented on Bartlett's and others' maps of Ulster.

The first type of Gaelic-Irish dwelling recognizable in Ulster around 1600 was the creat – a small, one-roomed, mostly windowless house of circular or oval form (*Fig. 1*). It seems to have been very simply built of post-and-wattle or wickerwork and roofed with thatch or sods. The hearth was centrally placed in the middle of the hut and it would appear that smoke escaped through a simple hole in the roof (e.g. *Gailey 1987*, 88-89; *Horning 2001*; *O'Conor 1998*, 96; *Robinson 1979*, 1-3; *Williams - Robinson 1983*, 37). Historical evidence would suggest that creats could be erected in a number of hours or less, provided the materials to build it had been gathered (*Robinson 1979*, 2; *Horning 2001*, 377). Arguments as to how a creat's roof was supported and constructed remain unresolved (*Gailey 1987*, 89). Nevertheless, it is possible that the post-and-wattle walls of a creat, given its relatively small size, were interwoven at roof level to give support for its thatch, giving it the appearance of an upturned round basket (e.g. *Doody 2000*, 145). Presumably the rounded shape of a creat and its roof made the structure very stable in high winds – despite the

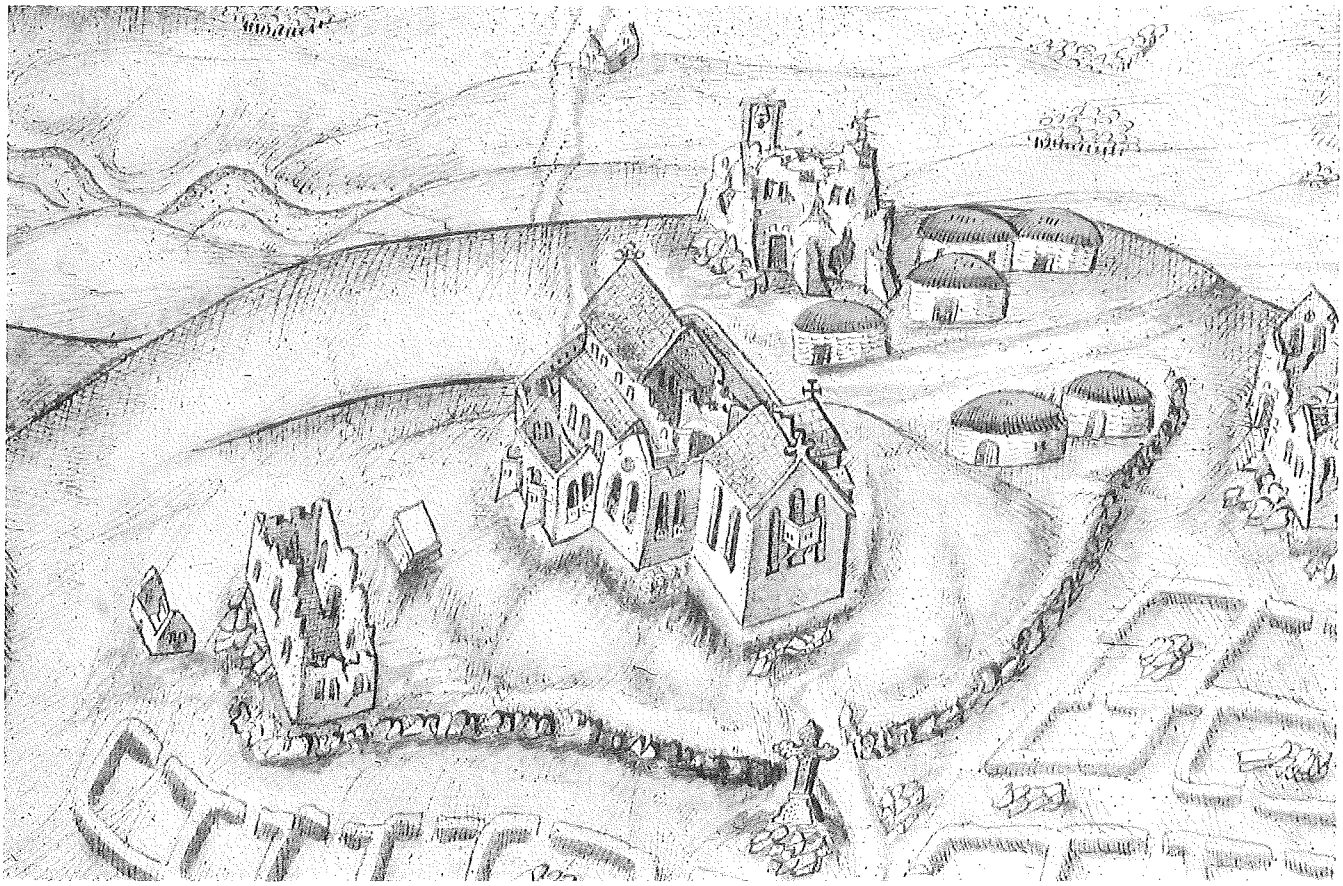

Fig. 1. *Oval- or circular-shaped, windowless creats can be seen beside the ruined churches in this depiction of Armagh around 1600 (Richard Bartlett map; see Hayes McCoy 1964).*

relatively light quality of the materials used in its construction (e.g. *Grogan forthcoming*). No creat has actually been excavated in Ulster presumably because their originally flimsy nature makes them difficult to trace archaeologically (*O'Conor 1998*, 96; *Horning 2001*, 377).

It has been argued that creats were merely temporary dwellings associated with booleying – a form of transhumance which saw the seasonal movement of cattle and at least some members of a community from permanent settlements to upland pasture or to more marginal low-lying lands (e.g. *Gailey 1987*, 88-89; *Williams - Robinson 1983*, 37).

Nevertheless, it is clear that many creats existed and were to be seen in well-settled fertile lowland areas of late 16th-century Ulster, often beside tower houses and on the edge of important nucleated settlements such as Newry and Carrickfergus. This suggests that many creats functioned as the permanent dwellings of at least the poorer elements in society throughout late medieval Gaelic Ulster (*O'Conor 1998, 96*; *Horning 2001*, 377).

Are creats purely a phenomenon of 16th- and early 17th-century Ulster? Certainly Ulster-based scholars have dominated the study of creats over the years and this perhaps gives the illusion that this house type was purely a Northern feature in late medieval Ireland. Yet there is some evidence to suggest that creats or creat-like dwellings existed outside Ulster during the 16th and 17th centuries at least. For example, Luke Gernon writing about Limerick in 1620 stated that small clusters of round chimneyless cottages built of wattle regularly existed beside tower houses in this area (*Graham 1970*, 200). These round houses were either thatched or roofed with sods (*ibid.*). The wording of Gernon's description and their location beside tower houses suggests that these wattle cabins were the dwellings of the lower elements in Munster society at this time. What appear to be round conical or beehive-like huts can be seen on late 16th- and early 17th-century maps of West Cork (*Andrews 2001*, 167). There are historical accounts from the first years of the 17th century of creat-like 'straw' huts from the same area (*Breen 2001*, 425). There are references to 'Irish creats' from Co. Longford, in the province of Leinster, during the 1650's (*Lucas 1989*, 61). Two circular wickerwork structures, both with clay floors and about 2m in diameter, were found in a post-1350 context during the excavation of Dunamase Castle, Co. Laois, also in Leinster. The exact dating of these structures is uncertain (one replaced the other) but it was suggested that they were possibly 16th or even 17th century in date. The excavator suggested that these structures were not used as dwellings but as storage for grain (*Hodkinson 2003*, 43). Whatever their exact function, it seems that

these two structures were round wickerwork huts very similar in their shape and style of building to Ulster creats but seemingly somewhat smaller in size. Clearly more work needs to be done on this point but the available evidence does strongly hint that creats or creat-like structures existed outside Ulster at least during the 16th and 17th centuries.

What is the earliest evidence for creats? As noted, there has been no excavation of one in Ulster and really our knowledge of them there only comes from late 16th- and 17th-century accounts and depictions of them. Given this lack of excavation and also the non-existence of detailed Gaelic-Irish socio-economic records of pre 16th-century date, little is known about the actual origin of creats. It could be argued that the simplicity of their design and the age-old technology used to erect them suggests that this type of house was in existence prior to 1500 and, indeed, were a common feature of high medieval Ireland. Horning has noted the similarity of such houses to circular post-and-wattle houses of early medieval date. While realizing that much more work needs to be done, she suggests that the creat may be the lineal descendant of these early medieval circular houses (*Horning 2001*, 377).

Did creats or huts like them exist in 12th-, 13th- or 14th-century Ireland? One problem with this hypothesis is that conventional archaeological wisdom in Ireland believes that rectangular carpentry-shaped houses replaced round wicker or post-and-wattle structures as the house-type of choice in the Irish countryside during the course of the 8th and 9th centuries AD. This change in house-shape and constructional techniques is regarded as being completed by the end of the 10th century and it is felt that that round houses were no longer built in Ireland after about 1000 or a bit before (see *Lynn 1978*). This accepted view can now be questioned in the light of new evidence from a recent excavation of a possible ringwork at Ballysimon, Co. Limerick. The construction and occupation of this site was dated on pottery evidence (which included Saintonge Ware) to the 13th and 14th centuries. The most interesting point about this excavation in the present context is that all the houses uncovered were of circular shape and supposedly built of post-and-wattle (*Fig. 2*; *Collins - Cummins 2001*, 23-30, 34-36). The site was probably correctly interpreted as an Anglo-Norman ringwork castle marking the site of a minor manorial centre due to its defensive siting, its location beside a later medieval parish church and its closeness to Limerick City (*Collins - Cummins 2001*). Nevertheless, it will be shown below that wattle construction in dwelling houses was ultimately a feature of Gaelic Ireland during the 13th and 14th centuries (and later) so this choice of building material for an Anglo-Norman lord, even a minor one as at Ballysimon, does seem somewhat strange. It was also an anachronistic choice for someone of Anglo-Norman stock as wattle-built domestic houses were no longer found in lordly contexts, even unimportant ones, in England by the 13th century and were rarely even seen in peasant or lower status dwellings there at this time (*Grenville 1997*, 32). It is just possible that the Anglo-Norman lord who lived at Ballysimon had employed local

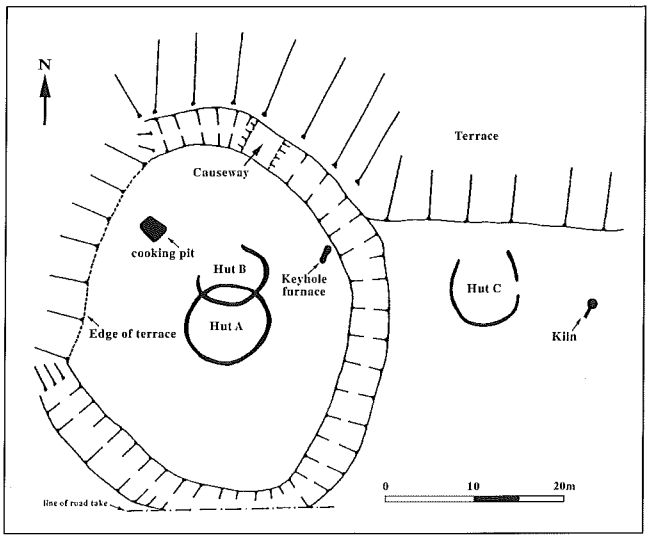

Fig. 2. *Recent excavation uncovered evidence for circular houses of 13th- or 14th-century date at Ballysimon, Co. Limerick (after Collins and Cummins 2001).*

Gaelic-Irish workmen to build him a house using native methods and building materials in much the same way Horning's excavation and research at Movanagher, Co. Derry, has shown that many English and Scots settlers lived in Gaelic-Irish style houses in early 17th-century Ulster (*Horning 2001*, 385-396). Anyway, whatever the ethnic backgrounds of the builders and occupants of the houses at Ballysimon, the importance of the excavation lies in the fact that it shows that circular wattle-built houses were constructed beyond the late 10th century and were to be seen in the landscape of 13th- and 14th-century Ireland. Ballysimon provides a link between the circular post-and-wattle and wickerwork houses of the early medieval period and the creats and creat-like structures of 16th- and 17th-century Ireland.

There is in fact some more archaeological evidence to put creat-like dwellings back into the 13th and 14th centuries – this time in what appears to be a definite Gaelic-Irish context. The construction of the hillfort at Mooghaun, Co. Clare, in the province of Munster, was dated to the Late Bronze Age by its excavator Eoin Grogan of the Discovery Programme. It was also clear to Grogan that a complex of three cashels, adjacent round hut-sites, hut-platforms and a field-system were erected within the hillfort long after it had fallen into disuse. Part of this later complex was excavated by the Discovery Programme team. While one of the houses produced an early medieval radiocarbon date from material found within it, there was more compelling artefactual and radiocarbon evidence to suggest that these cashels, houses and fields were 13th or early 14th century in date or at the very least were in use during this period, whatever their actual origin. As noted, the houses within this complex were circular in shape. They are defined today by low dry-stone walls and are 3.2 m-4.5 m in diameter. Excavation found no indication of internal postholes in the huts investigated and one interpretation of the evidence was that the superstructures of these houses were built of light

rounded post-and-wattle or wickerwork walls anchored into the dry-stone walling of their respective bases – giving these structures a basket- or bowl-like shape when in use (*Grogan forthcoming*). Again, if this was the case (admittedly the evidence is tenuous and needs more elaboration), the similarity between these houses and later creats is strong.

The evidence from the Mooghaun and Ballysimon houses hints that circular creat-like structures existed in the landscape of 13th- and 14th-century Ireland. Clearly this hypothesis should be tested by excavation by any future project on later medieval Gaelic Ireland. It might also be added that an oval sod-walled house excavated at Goodland, Co. Antrim, in 1949, which was associated with booleying, seems to have been occupied and built in the 17th century (*Sidebotham 1950*, 48, 52). While not a creat in the strict sense, the oval shape of this structure is further proof that curvilinear forms of houses were built in the Irish countryside long after the late 10th century.

Cruck buildings in later medieval Gaelic Ireland

The cartographic and excavated evidence also indicates that there was another more substantial type of house in late medieval Ulster at least. This dwelling was sub-rectangular in plan with rounded corners. Its walls were low and were constructed of clay and sods

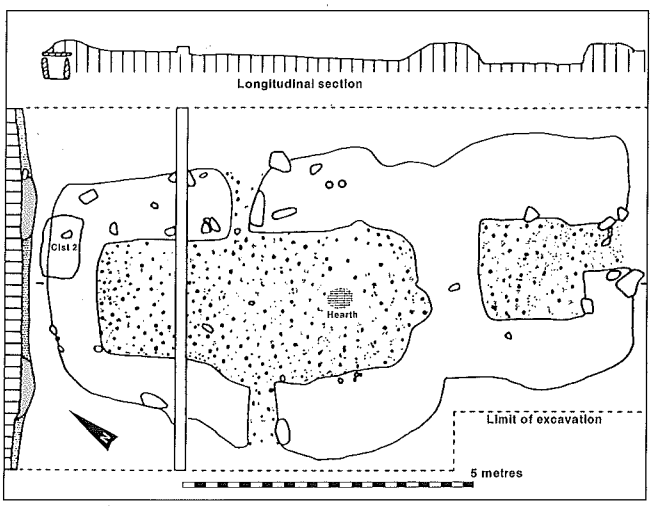

Fig. 3. *The sod-walled, sub-rectangular house with annexe uncovered by excavation at Glenmakeeran, Co. Antrim (after Williams and Robinson 1983).*

or post-and-wattle covered with clay (*Fig. 3*). The general view is that this type of house's thatched roof, which was hip-ended, was usually supported on cruck-trusses which lay either directly on the ground or on stone pads lying on the ground surface. In theory, the actual walls of this type of house did not carry the weight of the roof and were merely built to act as weatherproofing. The hearth was also central and smoke escaped through a hole in the roof. The available evidence suggests that there were no internal partitions in this type of dwelling, which quite often had opposing doorways (*Gailey 1984*, 26; 1987, 89; *Horning 2001*, 377-380; *O'Conor 1998*, 96; *Robinson 1979*, 7, 13; *Williams - Robinson 1983*, 30-37). Very often small circular or square annexes, entered by their own doorways, were attached onto the ends of this type of house (*Williams - Robinson 1983*, 30-32, 36; *Sidebotham 1950*, 44-46).

Did this type of house exist outside Gaelic Ulster during the late medieval period? This is a difficult question to answer as so little intensive archaeological work has been carried out to date on later medieval rural settlement, as already noted. Recent work in West Cork, however, by Colin Breen of the University of Ulster has indicated that such sub-rectangular, apparently cruck-built houses existed in late medieval Munster – recent excavation showing them in use during the 16th and early 17th centuries but possibly during the 15th century as well (C. Breen - *pers. comm.*). Breen's research shows, therefore, that this type of house was not just confined to Ulster but was seen in other parts of Gaelic Ireland as well, at least during the late medieval period.

The most obvious question about this type of dwelling is when did cruck-built houses first appear in Gaelic Ireland? Some work has recently tried to answer this question in some detail (*O'Conor 1998, 96*; *Finan - O'Conor 2002*, 81-82; *Horning 2001*, 377-380) There is a certain amount of historical evidence to show that cruck-built halls, chapels and barns were to be seen in the Anglo-Norman dominated parts of Ireland from at least the 1290s (*Alcock - Hall 1981*, 33; *Finan - O'Conor 2002*, 81). The problem here is that detailed socio-economic documents relating to the Anglo-Norman/English colony in Ireland, such as manorial extents, rarely date to before the very late 13th and early 14th centuries (e.g. *Down 1987*, 455). Given this lack of detailed early documentation and with little in the way of excavated rural sites of 13th-century date, it is hard to ascertain exactly when cruck building came to Ireland (*Finan - O'Conor 2002*). The earliest standing cruck-buildings in England have been dated dendrochronologically to the last third of the 13th century (e.g. *Alcock 1997*, 92; *Grenville 1997*, 59; *Mercer 1996*, 1). For example, an early cruck-building at Cotingham, Northampton, has recently been given a date of c. 1262 (*Hill - Miles 2001*). It must be remembered that such dates represent only the earliest surviving evidence for cruck-structures in England – not when this method of building was first used (e.g. *Alcock 1997*, 92). Certainly the earliest historical evidence for crucks in England and Wales starts in the very late 12th and early 13th centuries (*Alcock - Hall 1981*, 32-33). Furthermore, this form of building is absent from the eastern and south-eastern counties of England and is mostly confined to the western, middle and northern parts of that country and to parts of Wales (*Smith 1981*, 16). This is most interesting from an Irish perspective as most of the English tenants who came to populate and work the Anglo-Norman manors of eastern Ireland during the very late 12th and early to mid 13th centuries came mainly from western England and parts of Wales (e.g. *Eagar 1988*; *Graham 1993*, 73). It may be that

these English immigrants brought over the technique of cruck building to Ireland with them at some unknown stage before the mid 13th century. Equally it is possible that this method of building arrived in Ireland at a somewhat later date as a result of continued contact between these people and their descendants with their original home-places in western England (*Finan - O'Conor 2002*, 81-82). The main point here, however, in the present context, is that the documentary sources suggest that cruck-building was established in Anglo-Norman dominated parts of Ireland by the closing years of the 13th century.

This still does not answer the question as to when and why Gaelic-Irish lords first adopted cruck construction. Can excavation give an indication as to when and why cruck buildings came to be built in Gaelic-dominated areas of later medieval Ireland? Caution has to be used here, however, as it is often very difficult to identify cruck construction by excavation alone (e.g. *Addyman 1981*). Nevertheless, noting the strong cartographic evidence for cruck construction in late medieval Gaelic Ulster at least, the excavators of a number of these low sod-walled, sub-rectangular houses with rounded corners and attached annexes have strongly argued that the roofs of these structures were supported by cruck-trusses resting on the ground surface (e.g. *Williams - Robinson 1983*, 37; *Brannon 1984*, 168). For example, the excavation of the house at Glenmakeeran, Co. Antrim, produced no evidence for earth-fast posts within the structure (see *Fig. 3*). It was also felt that the low, sod-walls of this house were unsuitable for long-term roof-support. On the basis of this negative evidence, the two excavators of this house argued that it was a cruck building (*Williams - Robinson 1983*, 37). The excavation at Tildarg, again in Co. Antrim, uncovered evidence for what was called 'an obliquely cut void' in one of the low end sod and clay walls of the house here (*Brannon 1984*,168; *see Horning 2001*, 380). This seems to be excavated evidence for a gavelfork (*see Alcock - Hall 1981*, 34, 36). Again, at Tildarg, its excavator felt that the employment of low sod and clay banks to define the house in an area of abundant stone was an indication that these walls were never meant to be load bearing. The setting for what appears to have been a cruck-truss was also found during the course of the excavation (*Brannon 1984*, 168). Arguably, unlike many other excavations, quite substantial excavated evidence was found at Tildarg for the employment of a cruck-roof system (*Horning 2001*, 380). It might be added that the general view amongst Irish scholars at present is that the excavators of the houses at Glenmakeeran and Tildarg were correct in suggesting that these structures employed a cruck roof system simply because such a method of building suited later medieval Gaelic-Irish society. Certain historically-attested things such as periodic land redistribution amongst aristocratic kindred groups, lack of primogeniture in matters of lordship, the use of the landscape in defence against serious outside aggression and not fixed defences, and economic customs such as booleying seems to have meant that there was a constant movement of people within the countryside of any given part of later medieval Gaelic Ireland (see *Nicholls 1987*). This whole process of movement is still unclear and open to misinterpretation. Certainly there is evidence for wealth, permanent nucleated settlements and a settled agricultural landscape in later medieval Gaelic Ireland. Yet the social, economic and military factors, briefly outlined above, seems to also suggest that there was a constant building, rebuilding and desertion of houses throughout the landscape of later medieval Ireland. In this regard, a number of scholars have suggested and agreed in different ways that the employment of a cruck-roof system in these houses had its advantages in this scenario of movement. This is because cruck-trusses, the most important and costly structural element in these sub-rectangular sod-walled (or post-and-wattle walled) houses, could be easily taken down and moved to a new location to provide the roof supports for a new house (*Robinson 1979*, 2-6; *Brannon 1984*, 168; *O'Conor 1998*, 97; *O'Keeffe 2000*, 80; *Horning 2001*, 380).

The Gaelic-Irish may have adopted cruck construction, therefore, because it suited their economy and society. This still has not answered the question as to when this adoption took place. Everted rim ware was found associated with the occupation and construction of the house at Glenmakeeran (*Williams - Robinson 1983*, 31). Everted rim ware started to be produced in Ulster around 1200 or so and was still being used in the province as late as the early 17th century (*McNeill 1980*, 109-113; *Horning 2001*, 388; *O'Sullivan 2001*, 407). For example, in 1952 Humphrey Case excavated a very similar house to Glenmakeeran at nearby Goodland. Everted rim ware was found in this house in association with dateable artifacts of 16th- or possibly early 17th-century date (*Williams - Robinson 1983*, 36). This means that all that can be said about the date of Glenmakeeran is that the house there was built and occupied at some stage between the 13th and early 17th centuries. The house at Tildarg was also associated with everted rim ware but one radiocarbon date was obtained from ash within it and this gave a date of 755+/-50BP (Cal. AD 1164-1384) (*Brannon 1984*, 168). As just noted, everted rim ware starts to be produced in the very early 13th century. This one radiocarbon date and artefact evidence from Tildarg hint that the house there, which apparently used a cruck roof system, was constructed at some stage during the 13th and 14th centuries. Excavation, therefore, on admittedly flimsy evidence given the vagaries of radiocarbon and everted rim ware dating, points to the possibility that the Gaelic-Irish started to erect cruck buildings at some unknown stage in the 13th or 14th centuries.

More recent work, however, based on evidence from surviving praise poems has suggested a more precise date for the adoption of cruck building in Gaelic-dominated parts of later medieval Ireland. Cloonfree moated site is sited on top of a slight rise near Strokestown, Co. Roscommon (*Fig. 4*). In 1306 the stronghold of Aodh O'Conor, king of Connacht, with its palace or pailiss, was burned in a succession dispute (*AC 1944*, 208-210; *ALC 1871*, 534). Two contemporary or

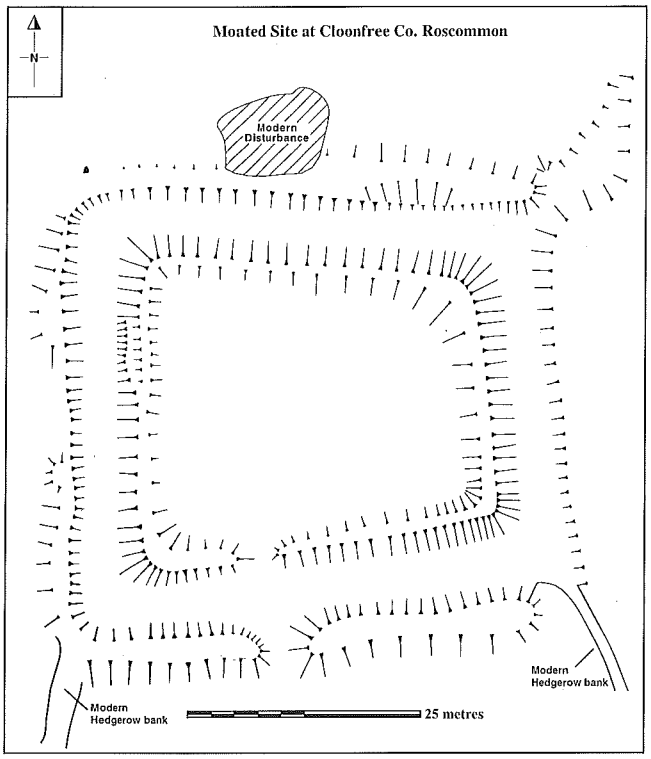

Fig. 4. *The moated site at Cloonfree, Co. Roscommon (Discovery Programme).*

near-contemporary poems are extant which were originally compiled in praise of this fortification and its builder – the above mentioned Aodh who died in 1309 (*Quiggin 1913*; *McKenna 1923*). It is generally held that the fortification referred to at Cloonfree in 1306 is the fine moated site seen there today (*Quiggin 1913*; *O'Conor 1998*, 87; *2000*, 94, 97; *2001*, 340; *Finan - O'Conor 2002*, 76-78). The poems indicate that there was a banqueting hall within the moated site in the early 14th century. This main building within the enclosure at Cloonfree had windows and was thickly thatched. The evidence from the poems suggest that the walls of this main house were constructed of wattle (*Simms 2001*, 252). Presumably the post-and-wattle walls of what must have been a largish rectangular building (certainly larger than a creat) would not have been strong enough to carry the weight of appears to have been a well-thatched, heavy roof. The most noteworthy reference in one poem is to what are called "foreign- or English-style" roof supports in this hall which are described as coming up "from below" (*McKenna 1923*, 643). The term *gall-gabla* is used to describe these roof-supports in this poem (*ibid.*). *Gabhal* is normally translated as meaning "forked" or "fork" (*Simms 2001*, 264). *Gall-gabhla* should, therefore, be translated as meaning "foreign-forks" or, more likely, "English-forks" (*Finan - O'Conor 2002*, 81-82). This is noteworthy as cruck building in 13th- and 14th-century England and Anglo-Norman Ireland are often described in manorial documents as being constructed of *furcis* or "forks" (*Alcock - Hall 1981*, 32-33; *Gailey 1987*, 89; *Finan - O'Conor 2002*, 81). This makes it highly possible that the *gabla* or "forks" mentioned in one of the poems about Cloonfree is referring to crucks which supported the roof of the hall there (*Finan – O'Conor 2002*, 81-83). This poem also implies that around 1300 in Gaelic Ireland cruck building was still seen as an English or at least foreign form of construction.

Overall the evidence, such as it is, suggests to the present writer that cruck construction was first brought to Ireland by Anglo-Norman and English settlers from western England and parts of Wales at some unknown stage in the half-century or even century after 1169. Cruck building seems to have been firmly established in Anglo-Norman dominated parts of Ireland by the 1290s at the very least in places as far apart as Carlow, Kilkenny and north Kerry. The literary evidence from Cloonfree suggests that cruck buildings started to be erected in Gaelic areas around 1300 or slightly later for important lords by builders who were aware of building methods then current in Anglo-Norman Ireland. Cruck buildings seem to have been extremely common in Gaelic areas of Ireland by late medieval times and seemingly were built by men of both low and high status at this stage.

Status and housing in later medieval Gaelic Ireland

Tadhg O'Keeffe, discussing the archaeology of Anglo-Norman Ireland in his recent book *Medieval Ireland - An Archaeology*, has underlined the difficulties in differentiating the houses of rich peasants from those of minor lords by excavation alone (*O'Keeffe 2000*, 72). At our present level of knowledge, this would seem to be even more of a problem in later medieval Gaelic Ireland. This is because the available historical evidence, such as it is, suggests that Gaelic-Irish princes and lords of the first rank – the social and military equivalents of powerful Anglo-Norman magnates who were often their cousins – seem to have lived in relatively similar accommodation to the less important elements in society, certainly before c. 1400 and in some cases and areas down to at least the early 17th century (*Nicholls 1987*, 403). For example, in 1228 the Englishman Abbot Stephen of Lexington stated that Gaelic kings and great lords dwelt 'in little huts of wattle, such as birds are accustomed to build when moulting' (*Lexington 1982*, 112). As late as the 16th and early 17th century, English and, indeed, Continental visitors to Ireland made disparaging remarks about the size and complexity of Gaelic-Irish aristocratic residences (*Nicholls 1987*, 403).

Are these references to peasant-like aristocratic residences in later medieval Gaelic-Ireland to be taken literally? Is this all part of a long concerted attempt by Anglo-Norman and later English observers to make indigenous Gaelic-Irish lords look uncivilized and backward in order to justify the conquest and colonization of their lands? These are difficult questions to answer due to a lack of excavation at Gaelic lordly sites of general later medieval date. Certainly the statement that Gaelic-Irish lords in the

15th, 16th and early 17th centuries all lived in peasant-like dwellings is absolutely untrue. It is clear that from about 1400 onwards Gaelic-Irish lords were erecting tower houses in much the same way as contemporary gentry in the Pale, Northern England and Scotland (*Cairns 1987*, 9). It might be added that some of these Gaelic-Irish tower houses, such as Bunratty, Co. Clare, and Blarney, Co. Cork, are as large and magnificent as anywhere else (e.g. *Sweetman 1999*, 134, 157, 161-163). Nevertheless, it is also clear that tower houses are few in number throughout parts of late medieval north Connacht and Ulster. The lack of tower houses in these areas seems to be due to the fact that in many cases Gaelic-Irish lords of the first rank there continued to live in and use crannogs (*O'Conor 1998*, 102). Furthermore, archaeological fieldwork and accompanying historical research has shown that Gaelic-Irish masonry castles and complex Hen Domen-type timber castles are relatively rare in high medieval (i.e. pre-15th century) Gaelic Ireland as a whole (*McNeill 1997*, 72-74, 157-164; *O'Conor 1998*, 75-77). This lack of castles in all parts of Gaelic Ireland up to around 1400 and their relative scarcity in the more northerly parts of Ireland down to the early 17th century must be seen as at least part confirmation of the allegations made by men like Stephen of Lexington's that important Gaelic-Irish lords often lived in relatively small, unsophisticated dwellings.

The available literary evidence from Gaelic Ireland suggests that many high medieval Gaelic-Irish royal and lordly halls (and possibly many late medieval ones), while lavishly decorated and some possibly quite large in size, were basically built of post-and-wattle (*Simms 2001*, 250-253). Colonial sources also hint that Gaelic-Irish princes lived in wattle-built houses and halls. It was already noted that in the 13th century Stephen of Lexington scornfully noted that Gaelic-Irish lords of the first rank lived in houses made of wattle. Another reference to Gaelic-Irish wattle buildings comes from the 1170's. Henry II held his court at Dublin from early November 1171 until early February 1172. It is stated that a temporary royal palace, made of wattles in the Irish manner, was built for Henry in Dublin during his sojourn there and was used by him to entertain visiting Gaelic-Irish kings and dignitaries (*Gesta Regis Henrici Secundi 1867*, I, 28-29). This all suggests that many Gaelic-Irish princely structures, such as halls, were built quite simply of post-and-wattle at least in the high medieval period down to the early 15th century and probably long after this in some areas of the country. Again, as stated above, wattle buildings were no longer found as dwellings in lordly contexts in England by the 13th century and rarely even used by peasants for residential purposes after c. 1200. The conservative choice and continued usage of post-and-wattle construction in high-status dwellings may be another reason why outside observers (who were not all of English stock) made disparaging remarks about Gaelic Irish housing right throughout the whole later medieval period.

This all suggests that at least some evidence exists to suggest that the claims made by certain later medieval commentators that Gaelic-Irish aristocratic dwellings were not unlike peasant or at least minor lordly housing elsewhere was based on some fact and not just pure bias. How can we explain this phenomenon of relatively low-key housing among many later medieval Gaelic-Irish kings and lords? Certainly it does not seem to be due to a lack of resources or technical ability. Extensive field-systems studied in certain parts of north Roscommon indicate that later medieval Gaelic-Irish agriculture was well-regulated and capable of producing a surplus (e.g. *Herity 1988*; *1991*, 4, 15-16, 33; *O'Conor 1998*, 139-140). Gaelic lords also patronized the church in much the same way as magnates did in other parts of Western Europe. For example, Cistercian and Augustinian foundations were a common feature of the landscape of high medieval Gaelic Ireland (e.g. *Stalley 1987*). There are numerous references within the sources to Gaelic-Irish kings and lords successfully besieging even the most complex Anglo-Norman masonry fortress, indicating that they had the necessary military ability and resources to seize these castles (*O'Conor 1998*, 95). The necessary wealth and technological knowledge to build large, sophisticated dwellings (such as but not only castles) does seem to have existed in pre-15th century Gaelic Ireland as a whole and in the more northerly parts of the island down to the 17th century. Why would many high medieval Gaelic princes and some lords in the northern parts of Ireland during the late medieval period down to c. 1600 deliberately choose not to erect spectacular dwellings for themselves?

Certainly it has been noted that aristocratic wealth and power during the whole later medieval period in Europe does not necessarily have to find expression in the construction of sophisticated buildings such as masonry castles or large undefended halls (see *Johnson 1990*, 248; *Grenville 1997*, 16). There seem to have been different ways of demonstrating high status in high medieval Gaelic Ireland than just erecting substantial and complex buildings and this way of doing things continued in some areas of the island down to the 17th century at least (like modern Fermanagh and Cavan where there is almost no evidence for tower houses). These different ways of expressing royal and aristocratic status in Gaelic areas seems to have included such things as regular feasting, lavish ceremonial activities at outdoor assembly and inauguration sites, the keeping of armed retainers, the ownership of great herds of cattle and horses and the patronage of the Church and the professional learned classes (*Finan - O'Conor 2002*, 83-86).

The fact that high status can be expressed in a number of different ways in any given society still does not fully explain why many high medieval and some late medieval Gaelic lords of the first rank chose to live in relatively unsubstantial and or at least simply-constructed buildings. It was already argued above that certain social, economic and military factors apparent in later medieval Ireland meant that houses seem to have been deserted and rebuilt on a relatively common basis. It could be suggested that the same socio-economic and military conditions created a situation where high-ranking Gaelic lords had little

need of substantial houses. For example, the custom of periodic land redistribution amongst landowning lineage groups may have led to an unwillingness amongst the highest echelons of the Gaelic lordly class to construct large, well-built houses (*Nicholls 1987*, 403). Valuable resources would only be wasted on a dwelling that would not have been occupied for very long. The Gaelic-Irish method of territorial defence was based on mobility within the landscape and not on static forms of defence such as castles. Clearly, the mental ability to desert one's residence rapidly and without regret upon the appearance of danger was needed in later medieval Gaelic Ireland (*O'Conor 1998*, 94-101). In this scenario of mobile warfare, which admirably suited the pastoral nature of Gaelic-Irish society, the realization that the actual occupation of any given house could not again be guaranteed for long may again have led to an unwillingness amongst many Gaelic kings and lords to invest in and construct high-quality accommodation. Primogeniture was not the firmly established method of succession to lordship in Gaelic Ireland as any member of the lordly lineage group could succeed, although there are examples of sons succeeding fathers on the dint of their own personal achievements. This often led to a multiplicity of heirs for any given lordship and this whole system of political inheritance (called tanistry by later English observers) often gave rise to political instability and successional warfare within the whole Gaelic polity (*Nicholls 1987*, 423-425). Again, perhaps the knowledge that political power would not be automatically handed down to one's sons may have led to a situation where any given Gaelic lord was unwilling to invest his resources in fixed assets on chiefry lands (the lands set aside for the ruler of the lordship), such as fine houses or castles, simply because his natural heirs would not automatically inherit them (see *McNeill 1997*, 168).

Such things as periodic land redistribution, lack of primogeniture in matters of inheritance to lordship and methods of warfare, therefore, may help explain why many Gaelic-Irish lordly dwellings of the first rank could have appeared to outside observers like Stephen of Lexington as being little different to well-to-do peasant or minor lordly accommodation elsewhere. Nevertheless, these are not totally satisfactory explanations as after 1400 or so many Gaelic-Irish lords, but not all, as noted, opt to build tower houses – many of which are quite substantial. These tower houses were built despite the fact that the custom of periodic land redistribution, tanistry and the use of the landscape for territorial defence continued in use in Gaelic Ireland right down to the early 17th century.

Clearly, the building of these tower houses suggests that there were changes in certain parts of Gaelic Ireland around the year 1400 that have yet to be fully explained by historians. The main point in this section of the paper, however, is that Gaelic Ireland certainly before the early 15th century and in some areas up to the 17th century is an example of a society where wealth and royal or aristocratic status does not seem to find expression in fine defended or undefended residences.

Conclusion and summary

Three main points have been made in this paper. Firstly, it is argued that there is some excavated evidence to suggest that circular houses, usually built of post-and-wattle, were constructed in the countryside of Gaelic-dominated parts of Ireland right throughout the later medieval period from the 12th century through to after 1600. Admittedly the amount of evidence for this is flimsy enough at present but this really seems to be due to a lack of work in Ireland on later medieval housing in general. Certainly cartographic evidence from around 1600 suggests that circular post-and-wattle houses, known as creats, were a common feature in Gaelic Ulster at that time. This is probably the case in other areas of Ireland as well. Any future project on Gaelic settlement should test this hypothesis that circular houses continued to be built in Ireland after the 10th century right down to the 17th century by more excavation and fieldwork.

It was also argued, secondly, that cruck buildings were first erected in Anglo-Norman Ireland at some stage in the 13th century or possibly even a little earlier. The main point in the present context is that it is suggested that Gaelic Irish lords start to copy this method of construction around the year 1300 and the idea then seems to have permeated down to men of lower social status after the latter date. Certainly cartographic and excavated evidence from Ulster suggest that many cruck buildings were to be seen in the countryside of late medieval Ireland.

There is also good historical evidence, thirdly, to suggest that Gaelic-Irish lords of the first rank continued to erect wattle-built structures for habitational and feasting purposes at least until the early 15th century, if not until the early 17th century in some areas. Later medieval Gaelic-Ireland is an example of a society where there seems to have been alternative ways of demonstrating power, wealth and prestige other than just erecting large and sophisticated residential buildings.

Zusammenfassung

Der Beitrag stellt dreierlei fest. (1) Es wird nahegelegt, dass die hauptsächlich aus Pfosten und Flechtwand erstellten Rundbauten der gälischen Iren noch während des ganzen Spätmittelalters (von zwölften Jahrhundert bis nach ca. 1600) gebaut wurden. (2) Bauten mit Kruckdach setzen etwa ab Anfang des 14. Jahrhunderts vereinzelt in gälischen Kulturbereichen ein. (3) Die verhältnismäßig unsolide Bauweise spätmittelalterlicher gälischer Adelshäuser ist ein Hinweis darauf, dass es neben dem Besitz großer, zivilisationstechnisch fortschrittlicher Wohnbauten auch andere Mittel gab, Ansehen und Prestige zur Schau zu stellen.

Résumé

Dans cet article, trois points principaux sont abordés. Premièrement, nous désirons montrer que les maisons rondes, habituellement faites de clayonnage, ont été construites par les Gaëls d'Irlande tout au long de la dernière partie du

Moyen-Âge, c'est-à-dire du XII[e] siècle jusqu'à un peu après 1600. Deuxièmement, on a commencé a construire les "cruck buildings" dans certaines parties de l'Irlande gaélique dès les premières années du XIV[e] siècle. Finalement, la relative fragilité des maisons seigneuriales gaéliques de la fin du Moyen-Âge nous permet de voir qu'à cette époque, il était possible de montrer son prestige et son statut autrement qu'en construisant des résidences vastes et sophistiquées.

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