The rural house in Medieval Ireland

Das Bauernhaus im mittelalterlichen Irland

Maison rurale en Irlande médiévale

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Four major stages can be recognised in the development of the Irish rural house between c. 500 and c. 1500, namely:

(1) Round houses (c. 500 - c. 850)
(2) Rectangular/sub-rectangular houses (c. 850 - c. 1200)
(3) House forms introduced by the Anglo-Norman settlers (c. 1200 - c. 1500), and
(4) Houses in Gaelic Ireland in the high and later middle ages (c. 1200 - c. 1500)

In terms of numbers, over 250 house plans (even if several of these are fragmentary) are known for the period between c. 500 and c. 1200. This contrasts sharply with the twenty or so house plans that are known for the period between c. 1200 and c. 1500.

Ireland was the last area of Europe to be effected by the westward-moving trend that introduced the long rectangular house to the countryside and for the period between c. 500 and c. 850 the characteristic structures were round houses. The classic Irish rural monument of this period is the ringfort or rath, a circular space, characteristically 30 m in diameter, enclosed by a bank and ditch (and sometimes by more than one). Within the enclosure it is normal to find a dwelling or two as well as outhouses and ancillary structures. The ringfort is Ireland's commonest monument form. Some 30,000 ringforts are thought to survive in the Irish landscape, while the sites of another 30,000 are known (*Edwards 1990*, 6-33). The other major settlement form of this period is the crannog, or artificial island, found in lakes across the northern half of Ireland (*Edwards 1990*, 34-40; *O'Sullivan 1998*). It is effectively a ringfort in water. Some 2000 crannogs are known. Over 200 ringforts and about a dozen crannogs have been excavated and, in terms of dating, the majority fall within the period between 600 and 900 (*Stout 1997*, 24-9).

An example of such a ringfort is Deer Park Farms, County Antrim, where the main occupation level was dated by means of dendrochronology to 648 (*Lynn 1991*). Within the enclosure were the remains of five circular buildings, each averaging between four and five metres across. Two pairs of buildings were conjoined to form a figure-of-eight plan. Both started as a single house with a central hearth flanked by curving benches that had the dual function of providing seating and bedding areas. Each house then acquired a smaller back-house or *cúile*, which provided additional space for living and working. A second example of a round house, which is dated dendrochronologically to 748, was found at the crannog at Moynagh Lough, County Meath (*Bradley 1991*). With a diameter of 10 m, it is the largest round-house known from early medieval Ireland. It had a double wall of post-and-wattle with an infill of material such as straw or ferns. There was a central hearth, which was flanked by curving benches as at Deer Park Farms. In addition, however, there were traces of internal lines of posts that formed small cubicles within the house. In the western and northern part of the house small pieces of metalworking slag were found in profusion whereas, in the eastern and southern part of the house, there was a predominance of personal objects, such as beads of glass and amber, jet bracelets and bronze pins. Since the evidence for internal divisions also occurred in the eastern and southern part of the house, it suggests that these cubicles were intended to provide small areas of privacy beneath the single large thatched roof. While this settlement was on an island, it was nevertheless at the centre of a working farm. The analysis of the animal bones indicates that cattle, sheep and pig were kept in approximately equal numbers but three-quarters of the meat consisted of beef, with sheep and pig providing about one-eighth each. Two-thirds of the cattle were cows and were usually killed in their third or fourth year, suggesting that it was predominantly a dairying- rather than a beef-economy.

The Moynagh Lough house had no internal roof supports and, with an internal diameter of 10 m, this appeared problematical when the site was first discovered.

Experiments at a number of sites, however, have shown that the wattle make-up of the walls was carried up onto the roof, giving the round house all of the strength of an up-turned basket. One of the advantages of providing a double row of posts-and-wattles was that the outer wall, which was most prone to weathering, could be removed every few years and replaced with a new one, while the inner wall remained intact. The walls were about 1.4 m high and, allowing for a roof pitch of 45 degrees in order to permit rainwater to run off, the roof would have been six metres high at the centre. Circular houses do not require smoke holes; the smoke gathers about head height and permeates out through the thatch.

Documentary sources, such as the seventh/eighth-century *Críth Gablach*, provide information on social status and ranking (*Binchy 1941*). *Chris Lynn* (*1994*) compared the dimensions given in the sources with those from excavations and concluded that there were

two main size groups. The first group has a diameter of four or five metres, while the second has a significant proportion concentrating at six metres and then it tails off to ten metres in diameter. The *Críth Gablach* lists twelve grades of essentially 'middle-class' society with the *fer midboth* ('retired man') or *ócaire* at the lesser end of the scale and the *bóaire* ('cowman') and others towards the upper end of the scale. Unfortunately, the *Críth Gablach* does not provide dimensions for royal houses but we can conclude that, in general, the ringfort house was the residence of the various grades of free-tenant in early Irish society (*Lynn 1994*, 91).

Rectangular houses gradually replaced round houses in the course of the ninth century (*Lynn 1978*). The rectangular houses occupied roughly the same area as their circular counterparts and they were commonly of dry-stone construction or were defined by kerbs made from boulders set on edge, which often defined low walls of clay. The interiors were frequently paved and they are often associated with stone-built souterrains, which were entered from within the houses. These souterrains were underground passages leading to a chamber, where foodstuffs could be stored (*Clinton 2001*). Although the carpentry of the contemporary horizontal mills is complicated and shows a knowledge of timber-framing, there is no evidence that this knowledge was applied to the houses. It is possible, however, that such techniques were kept for the most expensive secular dwellings, which may not have been exposed yet by excavation.

Despite the fact that there is documentary evidence for cow houses, barns and outhouses, only about a dozen structures from the period between 500 and 1100 have been identified, even tentatively, as outbuildings (*Lynn 1994*, 87-8). One reason for their scarcity may be that they were located outside the enclosure and little archaeological investigation has occurred outside ringforts. The seventh-/eighth-century laws mention a fine for using a man's outhouses or mill without permission and this could be taken to mean that these structures were located some distance from his residence (*Lynn 1994*). Another reason for the absence of outbuildings, however, may simply be the fact that there were never very many. Bede, writing in 731, records that Irish winters were so mild that snow never lay upon the ground for more than three days and that it was unnecessary to keep hay because the grass kept growing all year round and the weather was never severe enough to have to bring cattle indoors.

There are two major unresolved problems with the houses of this period, firstly, the origins of the round house and, secondly, the reasons for the transition from round to rectangular plans in the ninth century. The earliest Irish round houses appear as fully- fledged phenomena towards the end of the sixth century. At present they cannot be proved to be the surviving tail of a continuous prehistoric sequence because there are no firmly dated houses of the later prehistoric period between c. 600 BC and c. 500 AD. Round houses are known, however, from the Neolithic and Bronze Age and it is likely that the round houses of the early medieval period represent a survival from the Iron Age.

The change from round to rectangular plans has been explained in two ways. Firstly, that it was the result of the impact of Viking-style houses introduced by the Scandinavians in the ninth century (*Lynn 1994*, 85). However, apart from the urban dwellings of Dublin, Wexford and Waterford, where three-aisled rectangular dwellings of post-and-wattle have been discovered, there are virtually no Scandinavian-style rural buildings known from Ireland (*Wallace 1992*; *Hurley et al. 1997*). The only ninth-century, Scandinavian, rural excavation, at Cherrymount, Co. Dublin, produced buildings that do not conform to the plan of the urban examples (*Ó Néill 1999*). The second suggested source of influence is the church (*Wallace 1982*). This is a far more likely possibility given the ubiquity of churches in early Ireland but, so far, the evidence for pre-800 churches derives from manuscript illuminations such as that in the Book of Kells, depictions on sculptured crosses, or from documentary sources such as the account of Kildare in the seventh-century life of Brigid by Cogitosus.

It has been long accepted that 'variety in house form and construction methods (unless environmentally determined) provides sufficient grounds for suggesting cultural diversity on a par with differences in language, dress or art styles' (*Lynn 1994*, 82). The ninth and tenth centuries were times of great change in Ireland and not just because of the Viking incursions. It was a period that witnessed the emergence of powerful, centralising, regional kingdoms, an expansion in the concept of kingship, and the appearance of dynasties such as the Clann Cholmáin, powerful enough to style themselves 'kings of Ireland'. There were economic changes also. There was a decline in the self-sufficient ringforts and crannogs with their home industries of iron-working, bronze-smithing, leather-working, comb-making and glass-bead manufacturing. After 900 AD these activities became increasingly centralised at ecclesiastical sites such as Armagh and Clonmacnoise, or at the newly established port towns of Dublin, Wexford, Waterford, Cork and Limerick. Increasingly powerful kings replaced the old pattern of freemen volunteering for war-service with semi-professional armies of cavalry (or, perhaps, 'mounted infantry') and naval crews. Technological developments, such as the new ships introduced by the Vikings and quickly copied or captured by the Irish, made rule over the whole island possible and, as *Ó Corráin* (*1972*, 171; *1978*, 32) has pointed out, the kings were effectively starting to become feudal lords and displayed no compunction about eroding the rights of freeholders when political authority and proprietary right happened to coincide. The middle class distinctions of the *Críth Gablach*, and even the distinction between base and free clients, became blurred and simplified. The rectangular house is a part of this social change, the residence of the new man and of those anxious to keep up with changing fashions.

After 1170 and the coming of the Anglo-Normans, a new type of farm organisation, based on the manor, was introduced to Ireland. The monument type that appears to best represent the typical Anglo-Norman manor is the moated site, which may be defined as

a rectangular or sub-rectangular area enclosed by a bank and ditch, usually water filled (*Barry 1977*; *1988*). The area of the interior may vary from under 500 to over 8000 square metres but the majority are under 2000 square metres. Unlike lowland England, where they are usually found at the centre of villages, moated sites are normally found in Ireland in isolated sites, between 3.5 and 8 km from the nearest nucleated centre (*Barry 1977*, 159). A handful of moated sites have produced evidence of buildings. At Rigsdale, Co. Cork, the remains of a rectangular hall, 22 m long and 12 m wide, was discovered. A penny of Edward I, lost after 1280, was discovered in a construction level indicating that the site was built towards the close of the thirteenth century (*Sweetman 1981*).

Documentary sources help to fill out the archaeological picture of a manor's appearance. The earliest description of the manor of Knocktopher, Co. Kilkenny, in 1312, for instance, shows that it consisted of a complex of buildings and outhouses, mainly wooden, clustered around a motte (*Empey 1982*; *1983*). The motte was crowned with a palisade and tower while, in the bailey below, were a stone hall, a chapel, a kitchen, a cowhouse and barn as well as a range of smaller structures in varying states of disrepair. The main gate was defended by a wooden barbican and beyond the manorial enclosure lay a dovecot, three gardens and two mills. At Cloncurry, Co. Kildare, in 1304, the manor comprised a walled courtyard and a thatched hall and garden overlooked by the motte on which a one-roomed building with a shingled roof was situated (*O'Loan 1961*). There was also a farmyard with two small eight-post barns, a grain kiln, a threshing house, a cowhouse and a dovecot.

The people who lived in manor houses and moated sites tended to be wealthy free-tenants or members of the knightly class. More representative of the farming population was the small, free-tenant farmer who held only a few acres. At Knocktopher, for instance, the proportion of small free-tenants to tenants holdings 60 acres (c.24 hectares) or more, was about 3:1 (*Empey 1982*, 337). There is little information on what the houses of these small, free-tenants were like, although the two houses found at Bourchier's Castle, Lough Gur, Co. Limerick, may provide an insight (*Cleary 1982*; *1983*; *1984*). The larger (and later) of these was a two-roomed building with an attached byre, forming an L-shape in plan. The house was frame-built with mud walls 1.5 m thick. Seeds of oats, wheat and barley were present as well as legumes (field peas) and analysis indicated that while oats and barley were of equal importance to the economy, wheat was grown more rarely. Cattle, sheep and pig were the principal domesticates and there was an emphasis on meat production rather than dairying. Horse and domestic fowl were also in evidence but neither hunting nor fowling played much of a part in the economy. Associated with the occupation was a corn-drying kiln in which the seeds of wheat, oats, barley, bread-wheat and legumes were present.

Free-tenants also formed the basic population of villages where, in return for an annual rent, they would have received a plot of land within the settlement and a number of acres outside. Some manorial villages are still occupied today but others were deserted and it is the abandoned sites that have been the focus of such archaeological attention as these nucleated settlements have received (*Glasscock 1970*; *1971*). At Caherguillamore, Co. Limerick, the foundations survive of about a dozen houses with associated square or rectangular enclosures representing, presumably, the remains of yards or gardens. Two of these houses were excavated (*Ó Ríordáin - Hunt 1942*). House 1 was sub-rectangular with slightly bowed walls and measured 14 m by 6.5 m. The walls had a mortared base, faced internally and externally with stone, on which a wattle wall lined with clay was constructed. The floor consisted of the natural rock, which had been built up with soil in places to give it a level surface. The hearth was an open fireplace, about 1 m wide, in the centre of the house. There was evidence for a partition that created a private chamber at the west end. The entrance door was just off centre in the north wall; originally there had been a second doorway in the south wall but this was subsequently blocked up, perhaps when House 2 was built so close to it. House 2, which measured 10 m by 6 m, was rectangular and had been built upon the debris from House 1. The excavator dated the occupation to between the fourteenth and sixteenth centuries but the majority of diagnostic objects, of ironwork and pottery, would seem to be more at home in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. At Piperstown, Co. Louth, excavations uncovered a single-storeyed, rectangular house, measuring 8 m by 5.6 m, with the remains of a dry-stone wall to the east and wooden beam slots on the other three sides (*Barry 2000*). The eastern end of the house may have accommodated livestock and was separated from the western living area by an internal partition. The structure was dated to the thirteenth century.

Although much is known about the pattern and form of Anglo-Norman settlement, the identification of contemporary Gaelic settlements has posed difficulties. Almost all of Ulster, much of Munster and Connacht, as well as parts of Leinster lay outside of Anglo-Norman control. Unlike the well-defined series of Anglo-Norman settlement types there are no recognised Gaelic forms. This lack of recognition, however, may reflect the current state of scholarship rather than the reality on the ground. Little fieldwork or documentary research has been carried out and the subject has been neglected largely due to a lack of scholars trained both in fieldwork and in the handling of Middle Irish and Latin sources. The residences, for instance, of the Gaelic lords and major churchmen are occasionally referred to but no systematic effort has been made to identify these dwellings on the ground. The potential of this line of inquiry has been ably demonstrated in a pioneering study of three Gaelic settlements in County Wicklow (*Long 1994*).

Gaelic society, like Anglo-Norman society, was stratified and hierarchical. In general there were two landholding classes. Firstly, the chief families from whom the overlord, such as the O'Neill or the Mac Mahon, was traditionally elected and secondly, the subordinate septs, who rendered economic and military

services to the overlord. The non-landowning classes comprised the great mass of the population who, as tenants and labourers, cultivated the land. Generally referred to as 'churls' in contemporary English documentation, their status was very low and they were not permitted to bear arms until the middle of the sixteenth century (*Nicholls 1972*, 70-1).

At the apex of this society it is clear that the great lords could support a lifestyle every bit as lavish as that of their Anglo-Norman counterparts. Clonroad More, near Ennis, Co. Clare, was the main residence of the O'Brien kings of Thomond from the early thirteenth century and by the middle of the sixteenth century a village had grown up around it (*Bradley 1990*, 19-20). Excavations near the site recovered debris deriving from the castle (*Hunt 1946*). The finds included sherds of thirteenth-century French polychrome ware and the spout of a bronze aquamanile, probably manufactured in northern France. Although few in number, these objects indicate that wine and other commodities imported from Britain or the continent found their way onto Gaelic settlement sites during the thirteenth century and it suggests that the occupants were able to maintain a lifestyle similar to that of an Anglo-Norman lord. During the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries it was the normal practice for Gaelic lords to build imposing tower houses surrounded by a curtain wall with several subsidiary buildings. Examples include the O'Brien castle at Bunratty, Co. Clare, the O'Donnell stronghold at Donegal and the MacSweeney residences at Doe and Rahan, Co. Donegal (*Lacy 1983*, 356-9, 361-5, 376).

The dwellings of the junior members of major lineages and the senior members of minor Gaelic families are more difficult to identify. The existence of a settlement hierarchy is indicated by the list in the fourteenth-century *Caithréim Thoirdhealbhaigh*:

Gach rí ina rílongphort, agus gach táisech ina thrénisdad, agus gach tániste ina thegdais, agus gach mac óglaich ina inad, agus gach brugaid ina árus, agus gach ollam ina ráith, agus gach uasalchomarba ina áirdchill, agus gach mac degduine ina dúnad, agus gach laoch ina lios, agus gach espoc ina uasalchathair (*O'Grady 1929*, I, 134).

'Every king in his royal fort, every taoiseach in his stronghold, every tanist in his mansion, every warrior in his home, every landowner in his dwelling, every ollave in his rath, every coarb in his church, every decent man in his dun, every layman in his lios, and every bishop in his noble see.'

Even allowing for poetic licence the author clearly envisaged a range of settlements appropriate to the social grades but, in the present state of knowledge, such a hierarchy cannot be distinguished on the ground. Words like *dún*, *lios* and *ráth* may have a purely literary meaning rather than a morphological one but there are several documentary references to the use of earthen forts and crannogs in the later middle ages (*Rynne 1964*, 272; *Nicholls 1987*, 405; *O'Conor 1998*, 89-94). The example of Tullaghoge, Co. Tyrone, the traditional inauguration place of the O'Neills, is often quoted (*Rynne 1964*, 272; *Nicholls 1987*, 405; *O'Conor 1998*, 92). It is shown on a late Elizabethan map as a circular fort on a hilltop containing two thatched, whitewashed houses.

O'Conor (*1998*, 94-101) has demonstrated that there were two types of peasant house in Gaelic Ireland. One was the 'creat', a small, windowless, one-roomed house of circular or oval plan, simply constructed of post-and-wattle and covered with sods. The hearth was centrally placed and the smoke escaped through an aperture in the thatched roof above. This was the typical dwelling of the poorest people in Gaelic society but a second, more substantial form of house is also known. This is a sub-rectangular structure with prominently rounded corners. The walls were low and consisted of clay, sods, or post-and-wattle covered with clay. The thatched roof was supported on cruck-trusses that lay either directly on the ground or on pad-stones rather than on the clay or sod walls. An example of such a house was excavated at Tildarg, Co. Antrim (*Brannon 1984*). It was one of four house platforms located within a rectangular earthwork, measuring 82 m by 53 m, and bounded by a bank with an external ditch. The excavated building was placed centrally against the north side of the earthwork and it consisted of a rectangular platform measuring 16 m by 6 m. The house was sod walled with a hipped roof supported on crucks. The building had rounded corners and when thatched it would have looked like the Gaelic houses depicted on late Elizabethan maps (*Ó Danachair 1969*, 94-6). The material culture was poor and the only finds consisted of sherds of locally manufactured, thirteenth-century, everted-rim cooking pottery. The area within the enclosure was spacious and the excavator suggested that it may have functioned as a cattle enclosure.

Conclusion

The progression from round house to rectangular house to Anglo-Norman house may be phrased slightly differently as the continuation into the early middle ages (say 850) of an old prehistoric tradition of house-building, which is disrupted firstly in the ninth century and secondly during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. When expressed in these terms the Irish evidence fits into a broader scenario. In Anglo-Saxon England, the eighth and ninth centuries witnessed the shift from a conformity of plan type to the use of a wide variety of plans, while the appearance of cruck-building and long houses seems to reflect wider changes in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Similarly, between the Elbe and Weser, there is the continuation of an old prehistoric tradition leading to the emergence of the unsupported single-aisled house c. 800, followed by the appearance of outshots and the gradual development of the three-aisled house c. 1100.

If one is correct in seeing changes in rural housing across Ireland, Britain and the North Sea area, firstly in the eighth-ninth centuries and secondly in the eleventh and twelfth centuries, then perhaps it indicates that wider social forces were at work. 'The continuation of an ancient patriarchy', perhaps, to 800; 'the passing of the old order' or 'the transition to feudalism' between 800 and 1100; and 'manorialisation' for the period after 1100. The conflict between centripetal and centrifugal

forces, however, explains why these changes were not uniform. Instead the rural houses of northern Europe displayed, like the Irish examples, such strong regional characteristics that the real reasons for the pattern of change have remained unnoticed.

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