

# RURAL BOROUGHS IN MEDIEVAL IRELAND: NUCLEATED OR DISPERSED SETTLEMENTS?

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It has been known for some time that the Anglo-Normans offered burgess status as an incentive to attract colonists to Ireland during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. In her seminal paper on the character of Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland, Professor Otway-Ruthven remarked:

‘The very large number of small boroughs which were set up, places which can never have been more than large villages, but which were given the elements of an urban constitution, with burgage holdings, their own hundred courts, and usually the law of Breteuil, strongly suggests that, as on the continent, burgess standing was widely used as a bait to draw settlers, places such as Drumconrath or Syddan in Meath, Ardscull or Dunffijert in Kildare, Moyaliff in Tipperary, Glenogra in Limerick can never have had any real urban character’ (Otway-Ruthven 1965, 79).

The Anglo-Normans established about 300 boroughs, mostly in eastern and southern Ireland but some were established in the west and north of the country (Graham 1977; 1978; Martin 1981). Of these 300 boroughs about sixty developed into towns, or at least what a twentieth century scholar might regard as towns (Bradley 1985). What then of the other 240? Well, even from a cursory glance at what survives today, it is obvious that some were villages, others were almost large enough to be towns, some more were simply hamlets, while others again were abandoned.

In 1970, Robin Glasscock proposed the term ‘deserted Norman rural-borough’ for the abandoned settlements and it is one that has been widely used ever since. Deserted rural-borough was used ‘to denote those settlements, since deserted, where there is some documentary reference to burgages or burgesses, but which were probably primarily agricultural in function and never true towns’ (Glasscock 1970, 171). But what exactly does the latter phrase mean? According to Otway-Ruthven Ardscull, County Kildare, and Glenogra, County Limerick, had no real urban character, yet it is worth noting that Ardscull had 160 burgesses in 1282 while Glenogra had about 120 burgesses in 1298 (Otway-Ruthven 1965, 82). While there are difficulties in using these figures to estimate the population, it still suggests that Ardscull may have had a population of between 640 and 1000, while at Glenogra there may have been between 500 and 800 people. At the Newtown of Leys, another deserted borough, there were 127 burgesses in 1283 but the numbers had fallen to 40 in 1324. This would appear to suggest a population of 500-800, dropping down to 160-260. These may not have been towns but they were sizeable settlements none the less. Signs of nucleation, however, are rarely found by archaeological fieldworkers at deserted borough sites, and earthworks are scarce. A church or a castle (and occasionally both) might survive but it is a commonplace to report no surface indications of the borough settlement. In turn this has given rise to the idea that perhaps the burgesses did not live there and the view has been expressed that some boroughs may have existed simply as legal entities with the burgesses living in farmsteads dispersed across the landscape. Such an interpretation, however, poses its own problems. Firstly, it seems to contradict the very concept of a borough as a legally defined space in which the occupants enjoyed a privileged status. Secondly, if the houses were dispersed across the landscape, where are their remains?

The truth, it seems to me, is simpler. Absence of evidence is not necessarily evidence of absence. In fact the absence of earthworks is normal. This is for three reasons. Firstly many of the boroughs were inhabited for a short time, secondly perishable materials were used in their construction and, thirdly, the reversion of the site to agricultural uses meant that any surface indications were quickly obliterated. Two examples will suffice. Bunratty, Co. Clare, was inhabited for a little over forty years between 1276 and 1318. In 1287 the

settlement had 226 burgages and an estimated population of between 1000 and 1600. There are no surface indications of the borough, yet archaeological test excavations uncovered clear evidence of house remains lying exactly where they should be, close to the road (*Bradley 1988; Bradley - King 1991*). Close to the parish church of the medieval borough of Dunmanoge, Co. Kildare, a series of gravel spreads, pits and the remains of a rectangular structure were investigated in advance of laying the Cork-Dublin gas pipeline; sherds of thirteenth/early fourteenth century pottery, iron objects and animal bones were recovered (*Sleeman - Hurley 1987*). As at Bunratty, there were no surface features prior to excavation but the proximity of these features to the church suggests that Dunmanoge was also a nucleated settlement.

What did an Irish medieval borough look like? Can categories of boroughs be identified? Why did some boroughs succeed and others fail? What was the difference between a borough and a town? It is difficult to answer these questions authoritatively because so few studies have been carried out. Recently, however, a study of the medieval boroughs of County Dublin was published (*Bradley 1998*) and I propose to utilise the information in that study to determine whether these questions can be answered at county level.

There were at least eleven boroughs, in addition to the city of Dublin, within County Dublin during the Middle Ages. Eight of these boroughs were established by the Church in the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries. The archbishops of Dublin developed seven boroughs, five on the south side of the Liffey (Clondalkin, Dalkey, Rathcoole, Shankill, and Tallaght) and two north of the river (Lusk and Swords). The Augustinian abbey of St Thomas, one of Dublin's wealthiest religious houses, founded a borough at Donore. Three boroughs were established by secular lords. Newcastle Lyons and Saggart were founded by the king while Lucan was established either by Alard FitzWilliam or Warisius de Pech. The small role played by secular lords in the creation of boroughs contrasts with the situation over most of Ireland and it may be attributed to the fact that so much of County Dublin belonged to the church before the arrival of the Anglo-Normans.

The form and appearance of boroughs in County Dublin varied. Swords was one of the largest and most enduring boroughs established by the archbishops of Dublin. It was located in the heart of rich farmland and, throughout the later Middle Ages, Swords was known as the 'golden prebend' because its ecclesiastical revenues were so large. The settlement had a linear street plan focused onto the gates of the archbishop's palace; it was enclosed by earthen defences, and there was a weekly Monday market. In 1326 there were 122 burgesses at Swords. Clondalkin was a smaller borough with thirty-two and two-thirds burgages in 1326 but it had a corporate body run by a bailiff. The parish church with its pre-Norman round tower dominated the settlement. There was a smaller chapel (perhaps a chapel-of-ease) and the archbishop maintained a residence there but it was not as impressive as that at Swords. Clondalkin probably had market functions but there is no record of them. By 1393, however, there were at least five streets in the borough suggesting that its fortunes may have improved. There is no evidence that Clondalkin was enclosed.

The borough of Shankill appears to have been smaller still. It was located in the forested foothills of the Dublin Mountains. The extent of 1326 describes it as formerly having seventeen burgages, rendering 17 s. ld. per annum, but it was now waste because the burgesses had fled from it on account of attacks made by the Gaelic Irish. The settlement was never re-established and even the site of the borough can only be approximately located.

In view of the physical variation between boroughs the question arises as to whether categories of boroughs can be recognised? There are two ways of approaching this. One is to tabulate the functional topographic features in much the same way as has been done for towns (*Bradley 1985, 420*); the other is to compare the boroughs' annual rents.

	Dalkey	Swords	Tallaght	Clondalkin	Lucan	Newcastle Lyons	Saggart	Lusk	Rathcoole	Shankill
Parish church	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x
Street(s)	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	x	
Market/Fair	x	x	x				x	x		
Defences	x	x	x			x	x			x
Fortified houses	x	x		x		x	x		x	
Seigneurial castle		x	x	x	x	x				x
Port/harbour	x									
Bridge					x					
Mills				x	x				x	
Chapel(s)		x		x						

Table 1. Comparison of the functional topographic features of County Dublin's medieval boroughs (Donore is omitted because of the absence of topographical data).

Three categories emerge from this tabulation. Firstly, Dalkey, Swords and Tallaght were settlements that possessed a well-defined street-pattern, they had a built-up area focusing on the market-place, and they were enclosed by earthen defences. The second category consists of Clondalkin, Lucan, Newcastle Lyons and Saggart. These were settlements with a parish church and a street but the evidence for economic functions is less clearcut. Thirdly, there is a group consisting of Lusk, Rathcoole and Shankill, which have only three, or at most four, of the functional topographic features.

Borough	Burgess rent	Burgages	Est. population
Swords	137s. 11d	122	500-800
Rathcoole	100s.	66	250-400
Dalkey	76s. 3d.	39	160-250
Lusk	37s	36	140-230
Clondalkin	?	32.66	130-210
Shankill	17s. 1.5d.	17	70-110
Tallaght	15s.	15	60-100

Table 2. Value of boroughs in County Dublin in 1326. The burgess rent of Donore, Lucan, Newcastle Lyons and Saggart is unknown. Source: McNeill (ed.) 1950: Calendar of Archbishop Alen's register.

The usual annual rent for a burgage was 1s but in the case of Swords, Rathcoole and Dalkey the rent is higher than the number of burgages. This suggests that by 1326 the number of burgesses may have fallen from what it was in the thirteenth century. If one looks at the number of burgages in Table 2, however, a gradation in size is immediately apparent. Swords is exactly twice the size of Rathcoole, which is in turn twice the size of Clondalkin, and Clondalkin, in its turn, is twice the size of Tallaght. This tabulation would appear to indicate a fourfold classification.

	1326 Rankings	Functional Rankings
Category 1	Swords	Swords Dalkey Tallaght
Category 2	Rathcoole	Clondalkin [Lucan] [Newcastle Lyons] [Saggart]
Category 3	Dalkey Lusk Clondalkin	
Category 4	Shankill Tallaght	Shankill Lusk Rathcoole

Table 3. Comparison of the 1326 rankings with the functional rankings.

A comparison of the two tables shows that Swords makes it to the top and Shankill makes it to the bottom in both sets of rankings. Otherwise, it is the differences in the rankings that are of most interest. A clear problem with the functional rankings is that they telescope features across time. So Dalkey appears in category 1 of the functional rankings because of archaeological evidence that is mainly fifteenth century in date; furthermore, it is known that the settlement was of much less importance in 1326 than it was in 1476. The same is the case with Tallaght, which appears to have been enlarged in the fifteenth century when settlements such as Rathcoole and Saggart were encroached upon by the Gaelic Irish. Perhaps the main point to derive from the tabulation is that borough fortunes varied through time and a functional categorisation cannot give the same precision as a temporal one.

### What was the difference between a borough and a town?

In many instances, of course, there were no differences. Borough and town were often synonymous. The general perception that burgesses in small boroughs were engaged primarily in agriculture may be true but it needs to be remembered that burgesses in large towns engaged in primary production also. The extent of the burgesses involvement in agriculture is brought home, for instance, in a recent study of Kilkenny (*Bradley 2000*). The long gardens at the rear of the burgage plots were used by the burgesses to grow vegetables and herbs, as well as to plant orchards for apples, pears and other fruit. From the late sixteenth century onwards, when visitors' accounts become available, the gardens and orchards of Kilkenny are consistently highlighted as a remarkable feature of the townscape. Gardens within and without the town were rented and the names of several have been preserved. On the outskirts of the town, in all directions, were fields, some of which were privately owned while others formed part of the commonage. The Gibbet Mede, 11 acres of meadow, lay to the south of Kilkenny Castle but others are less precisely located although their names evoke a lush image of *rus in urbe*: the Green Heys, the High Heys, the Medoc [?Meadow] Heys, the Low Heys, the Long Meadow. Some of these fields were used by the burgesses to grow corn and it is evident that they harvested and stacked it prior to bringing it to the mills for grinding. The extent of Kilkenny's medieval burgagery is unknown but in 1640 it comprised almost 11 000 acres and extended for a radius of about two miles from the town. Use of the commonage was strictly controlled. Digging was prohibited and tenants were required to

keep the land 'playne [i.e. open] and grene' so that it could be used for shooting and other pleasures. The creatures being shot at presumably included both fowl and game, and the murage grants indicate that there was a trade in birds, and in the skins of fox, squirrel, badger, hare, rabbit and deer. Fishing was also an important source of food and fishermen lived and traded in the town.

The absence of the craft base was, perhaps, a more striking feature of the smaller boroughs. In fifteenth century Kilkenny, with a population ranging between 2200 and 4000, there were blacksmiths, carpenters, stone-cutters, masons, butchers, bakers, millers, chandlers, tanners, glovers, shoemakers, fullers, weavers, dyers, tailors, girdlers, barbers, tavern keepers, alewives, and general merchants in addition to the clerks, barristers, associated with the courts, the nurses and doctors who cared for the sick, the clergy and chaplains associated with the church, the gaolers, guards and household staff associated with the castle (*McNeill 1931*). Every borough might boast a blacksmith, a carpenter and a leatherworker but the range of crafts and trades associated with a town was more varied and extensive.

### *Why did some boroughs succeed and others fail?*

Several explanations have been advanced. Basic environmental features were undoubtedly important. The good agricultural hinterland of Swords gave it an enduring advantage. Rathcoole, Saggart and Shankill were in exposed uplands and were difficult to defend once the political situation changed. Changing environmental and technological features also played a role. The silting-up of the River Liffey, coupled with the construction of larger deep-water ships, meant that ships could no longer dock in Dublin. The need for a deep-water port led to the development of Dalkey in the fifteenth century (*Smith 1996*). Political considerations also played a role. The shrinkage of the Dublin government's control led to the abandonment of Shankill in the fourteenth century, while Tallaght appears to have been expanded in the fifteenth century at the expense of Rathcoole and Saggard. Demographic changes were another important factor influencing growth and decay. We are so used to using the Bruce Wars (1315-17), the famines of the 1320s, and the Black Death of 1348-9, as explanations of population decline that we tend to become blasé about them. But even in the nineteenth century, disease and famine had a dramatic effect on Ireland's population. The city of Kilkenny, for instance, had a population of 23 741 in 1831. In the following year a cholera epidemic killed 10 % of the population reducing it to 19 071 in 1841. In the succeeding years famine coupled with changing economic circumstances reduced the population further and by 1926 it had dropped to just over 10 000. In the census of 1996, the population was 18,696, still significantly short of the population levels of the 1820s (*Bradley 2000*).

The neat categories and models that we construct for medieval boroughs and rural settlements will remain a purely intellectual exercise unless we can also establish patterns of settlement fluctuation and diversity over time. It is important to remember that a settlement, which was enclosed in one century, may not have been in another. A settlement that had 150 burgesses in one century may have been abandoned in another, while a settlement with 17 burgesses in one century may have had over 100 in another. Settlement was not static in the Middle Ages; neither did it conform to simple models of plantation, growth and decline. More detailed local studies are necessary before we can establish patterns. Such studies need to examine the interplay of environmental resources with the human and technological resources available to exploit them, as well as examining economic and political forces, the demographic trends, and the impact of famine and disease. Undoubtedly, we may have to allow for a much larger population in the thirteenth century than we do normally; and perhaps we also need to reflect on the fact that the urban/rural divide may not have been as great as we sometimes think it was.

*DORFGEMEINDEN IM MITTELALTERLICHEN IRLAND:  
GRUPPEN- ODER STREUSIEDLUNGEN?*

*LES SITES RURAUX EN IRELAND MÉDIÉVALE:  
L'HABITAT GROUPÉ OU DISPERSÉ?*

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