

THE ETHNICITY OF IRISH MOATED SITES

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Introduction

It must be remembered that the arrival of the Anglo-Normans to Ireland from 1169 onwards was different to the conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066. In Ireland individual Anglo-Norman lords had carved out territories for themselves or had been granted them by the king during the course of the late 12th and 13th centuries. It is clear that many native Gaelic-Irish peasant cultivators remained to work the land in these Anglo-Norman controlled regions of medieval Ireland (*Down 1987, 457-459; O'Conor 1998, 44*). Anglo-Norman lords, however, also introduced peasant colonists of mostly English but sometimes Welsh and Flemish origin to help run their manors more effectively (e.g. *O'Conor 1998, 41-43*). Yet no plan of island-wide conquest was ever attempted and there had been a distinct tendency amongst Anglo-Norman lords to leave more remote regions of Ireland and districts of often marginal land to indigenous Gaelic-Irish lords and lineage groups. These Gaelic-dominated regions included most of Ulster west of the Bann, much of Connaught, west Munster and the bogland and mountain areas of the Anglo-Norman lordships of Leinster and Meath - in all a considerable part of medieval Ireland (*Glasscock 1987, 225-226; Nicholls 1972, 13*). The relationship between Gaelic kings and lords in these regions and the Anglo-Normans and colonial government varied considerably in the 13th century from virtual independence in some areas to the status of rent- or tribute-paying tenants in others (*O'Conor 1998, 73*). The actual area of Gaelic domination, both in a political and cultural sense, was to grow considerably in the 14th century as large parts of the colony (but not all) disintegrated due to various pressures (e.g. *Barry 1987, 168-198*). It is against this mixed ethnic background that I want to discuss the phenomenon of moated sites in medieval Ireland.

Irish archaeologists and historians have known since at least the time of Robin Glasscock's and Terry Barry's pioneering work on the subject in the 1970's that the moated sites seen throughout much of Ireland represent the remains of isolated, semi-defended homesteads of medieval date (*Glasscock 1970; Barry 1977*). Moated sites in Ireland mostly appear today as rectangular earthworks bounded by banks and ditches. Sometimes these surrounding fosses are water-filled but not always. Some moated sites are square in plan and fieldwork would suggest that quite a number in Ireland are wedge-shaped (*Barry 1977, 111-112; 1987, 84-85; O'Conor 1998, 58*). The latter shape may be an attempt by the builders of such earthworks to provide a simple form of flanking defence to the entranceways of these moated sites. Circular moated sites occasionally exist, especially in south Co. Wexford (*Moore 1996, 95*).

It was once thought that about 750 moated sites occurred in medieval Ireland (*Glasscock 1970, 164*). The ongoing fieldwork of the Archaeological Survey of Ireland, however, is adding to this figure each year. For example, it was once felt that there were 118 moated sites recognizable in modern Co. Wexford (*Barry 1987, 85*). Recent fieldwork has suggested that at least 130 existed in the latter county, probably more (*Moore 1996, 95, 110*). Similarly, 13 moated sites were once believed to have occurred in Roscommon - now at least 30 moated sites are known to exist in this county after the Archaeological Survey finished its fieldwork there under Michael Moore in 1997. These increasing numbers suggest that the final total of moated sites still to be seen in the Irish landscape may possibly be around the 1000 mark (*O'Conor 1998, 63*). In all, given these figures, it is clear that the moated site is the most common monument-type of 13th/14th century date visible today in the Irish countryside.

Despite the importance of this earthwork-type, however, only five definite moated sites have been excavated to date in Ireland. Most of these have been partial, non-research orientated rescue excavations done

relatively rapidly in advance of development (*O'Conor 1998*, 63-69). It might be added that very few medieval rural settlement sites of all types have been excavated in Ireland this century and this is especially true of the Republic. Medieval excavations have tended to occur in towns and cities as part of partially EU-funded urban renewal schemes (*O'Conor 1998*, 9-16). Our knowledge of moated sites in Ireland is based on the results of these pitifully few excavations, some fieldwork and a few historical references.

The majority of moated sites in Ireland occur in certain southern and eastern counties, such as Wexford, Kilkenny, mid Cork and Limerick – some of the areas that were heavily settled by the Anglo-Normans in the late 12th and 13th centuries (*Glasscock 1970*, 162-166). It is clear, however, that other regions that also experienced heavy Anglo-Norman settlement after 1169, such as the present counties of Meath, Dublin and Louth, contain almost no moated sites. These counties really constitute the core of the Anglo-Norman colony today. Conversely, very few moated sites exist in what were the heartlands of Gaelic-controlled areas of medieval Ireland during the 13th and 14th centuries, notably many western and northern areas of the country (*Barry 1987*, 85).

In all, the distribution of moated sites in Ireland indicates that very often they were concentrated on what were the de-facto border areas of the heavily-settled parts of the Anglo-Norman colony during the 13th and 14th century. Barry has shown that these frontier areas were the regions that saw Anglo-Norman settlers come under military pressure from the Gaelic-Irish during the second half of the 13th century. These attacks by Gaelic lords and kings increased and intensified in these districts after 1300. Barry has argued on this evidence that moated sites were needed by minor Anglo-Norman lords in such frontier areas after c. 1250 as a protection against raiding by the Gaelic-Irish, lawlessness and petty larceny (*Barry 1977*, 176; *1981*; *1987*, 84-85). It was also argued by Canon Empey in the early 1980's that moated sites in modern Co. Kilkenny, clearly a more secure area of the colony, represent a secondary phase of Anglo-Norman settlement in this region and were constructed in the period 1225-1325. The latter writer sees moated sites as part of a movement out from core areas of Anglo-Norman settlement onto more marginal land (*Empey 1982*, 335).

Two prominent points arise from this discussion of work carried out until very recently on moated sites in Ireland. Firstly, while it was always realised that some moated sites may mark the remains of granges belonging to certain colonial monastic houses, these earthworks have been regarded in the past as mainly representing the homes and farmsteads of unimportant Anglo-Norman knights. They have been traditionally been seen as minor lordly sites. Secondly, moated sites were not believed to have been built in Ireland during the primary phase of Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland – say in the first fifty to eighty years after 1169.

It is the first point concerning the related topics of the function of Irish moated sites, the ethnic origins of their builders and their place in the social hierarchy of medieval Ireland that I want to discuss for the rest of this paper and put forward new ideas from recent research on this monument-type.

Recent research on the moated site series in Ireland

What then is the actual evidence for moated sites functioning almost exclusively in medieval Ireland as minor manorial centres and the homes of petty Anglo-Norman lords? David Sweetman's 1977-1978 excavation of the moated site at Rigsdale, Co. Cork, uncovered evidence for the foundations of a large possibly timber-framed hall with an attached garderobe and a gatehouse within the enclosure. Perhaps the best way to interpret the impressive-looking evidence from this moated site is to suggest that it functioned as an unimportant manorial centre, perhaps inhabited by a minor lord, his family and retainers (*Sweetman 1981*; *O'Conor 1998*, 66). Billy Colfer has identified the moated site extant at Meylerspark, Co. Wexford, built in 1282-1284, as an outfarm located on demesne land belonging to the Bigod manor of Old Ross (*Colfer 1996*). Both the moated sites at Rigsdale and Meylerspark, therefore, do seem to be associated with lordship. This suggests, especially the evidence from the former site, that some moated sites in medieval Ireland were built and occupied by minor Anglo-Norman lords.

More recent work, however, admittedly not terribly developed as yet, has put forward the plausible idea that in fact many moated sites in Ireland actually represent the semi-defended farmsteads of large or strong farmer-type free tenants (*McNeill 1997*, 148-149; *O'Keefe 1997*, 12; *O'Conor 1998*, 61-69). This latter group can perhaps be defined as prosperous peasants of originally mainly English origin, with quite high

status in Anglo-Norman manorial society (O'Connor 1998, 62). Certainly, it has been argued that the finds and structures uncovered at the other excavations of moated sites in Ireland are not terribly different to those recovered from the few excavations of undefended peasant houses located beside Anglo-Norman manorial centres (O'Connor 1998, 63-69). This would mean that moated sites in medieval Ireland, as in England, were not solely a lordly phenomena. The argument that many moated sites in Ireland were in fact built by prosperous manorial tenants of ultimately peasant stock would also help explain why virtually none are located at the *capita* of known Anglo-Norman manors. It would also account for the fact that moated sites are hardly ever mentioned in the surviving historical sources. For example, manorial Extents rarely if ever describe the dwellings of individual tenants on manors (O'Connor 1998, 43-44).

The discussion so far has dealt with the moated site as a relict feature of colonial settlement in medieval Ireland. As noted already, the traditional view of moated sites in Ireland is that they were built purely by Anglo-Norman settlers. Most importantly for this paper, recent work by the Discovery Programme and others in Co. Roscommon indicates that in fact the indigenous Gaelic-Irish also built moated sites. It was briefly suggested by Brian Graham in two articles that came out a decade ago that a small series of moated sites in mid Roscommon could possibly have been built by Gaelic-Irish lords, particularly the O'Conors (Graham 1988a, 29-32; 1988b, 122). This was simply because most of modern Roscommon, particularly the middle and northern parts of the modern county to the north of Roscommon Town, where many moated sites are located, was never settled by the Anglo-Normans (Graham 1988a, 22-23, 30). This observation about the Gaelic usage of moated sites was not developed further by Graham at the time.

As mentioned above, recent fieldwork by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland has increased the number of moated sites in Roscommon to about thirty. It must be remembered that comprehensive county-wide fieldwork had not been done in Roscommon prior to 1995. Much of it was unexplored territory from an archaeological point of view before the latter date. As the distribution map shows, these moated sites are mainly located in the northern half of the county – already noted as the part of Roscommon which remained under the local control of Gaelic lords down to the 17th century (Fig. 1). At a general level, therefore, the best way to interpret this evidence is to suggest that the Gaelic-Irish built and occupied these sites simply because no Anglo-Norman / English colonists settled in this part of the county during the 13th and 14th centuries. Research by the Discovery Programme, however, has been able to take this idea further and identify some Roscommon moated sites with certain Medieval Gaelic-Irish settlement sites mentioned in the various surviving annals. Further historical research and fieldwork indicates that other moated sites in the area occur beside important medieval Gaelic centres. It is now proposed to discuss some of these Gaelic-Irish moated sites in Roscommon – a couple of which have been planned very recently by the Discovery Programme.

It was once believed that the Irish word or term *longphort* was only used in the medieval Irish sources to describe temporary fortified camps erected during the course of campaigns or sieges (e.g. Graham 1988b, 125). More recent work, however, suggests that from at least 1200 onwards the word more often meant a permanently-occupied defended or semi-defended rural site of lordly status. Some 13th or 14th century *longphorta* in the West of Ireland can be identified with prominent cashels or large stonewalled ringforts, natural island fortresses and at least one crannog (O'Connor 1998, 84-87, 89-94). The term does not seem to be used to describe fortresses that we would today at least classify as castles, such as mottes and masonry castles. This word appears to be used to describe fortifications that were not as defensive as true castles, at least in terms of their artificial defences.

At least two of the Gaelic *longphorta* referred to in the annals during the 14th century as being in modern Co Roscommon can be identified as moated sites. A 'palace' and 'house' are mentioned in 1306 as being located within Aedh O'Connor, king of Connacht's *longphort* at Cloonfree, near to the town of Strokestown (AC 1944, 208-210; ALC 1871, 534). A praise-poem of about the same date describes Aedh's house within this fortress as being wondrous in design and renowned for its hospitality (Quiggin 1913). The site today can be identified with a fine originally bivallate wedge-shaped moated-site in Cloonfree townland located right beside the main Castlebar / Dublin road – one of the main arteries into the West of Ireland proper from the east coast (Fig. 2).

The Rock of Lough Key was a MacDermot fortress and residence from the 12th century through to the 17th century. It was a natural island fortress located out in Lough Key and it seems to have had relatively simple crannog-like defences up to the 15th or 16th century when a tower house was built on the island. A folly was constructed on the Rock in the early 19th century (O'Connor 1998, 76).

Clearly separate from the Rock but close to it, MacDermot lord of Moylurg's *longphort* is first mentioned in 1342 (AC 1944, 291, 303, 353; AFM 18, 577, 592-593). The 19th century scholar John O'Donovan, editor of the Annals of the Four Masters, indicated that this site had to be located on the nearest dryland to the Rock, somewhere in the vicinity of the then standing Rockingham House. He specifically suggested on

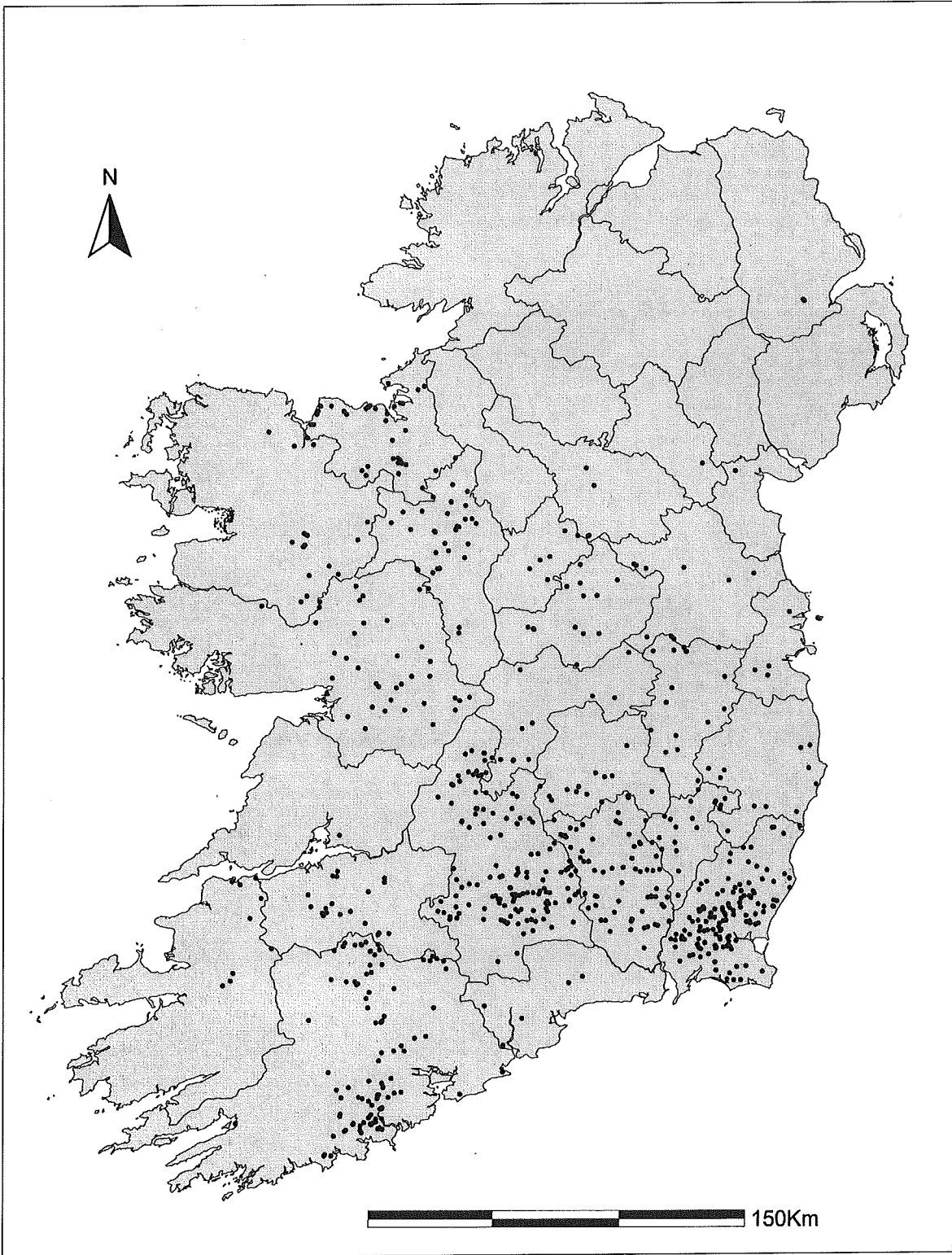


Fig. 1. Distribution map of moated sites in Ireland.

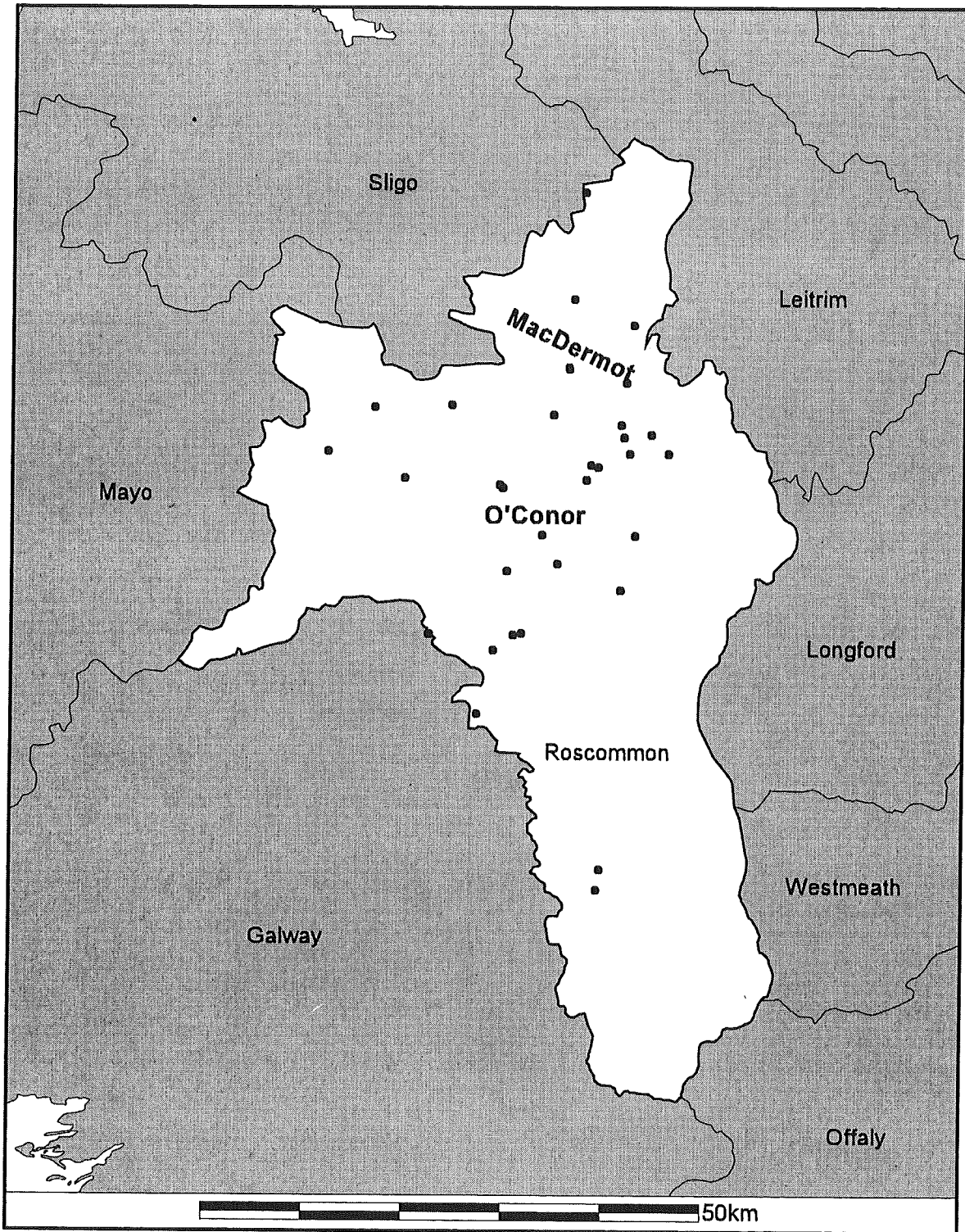


Fig. 2. Distribution map of moated sites in Co. Roscommon.

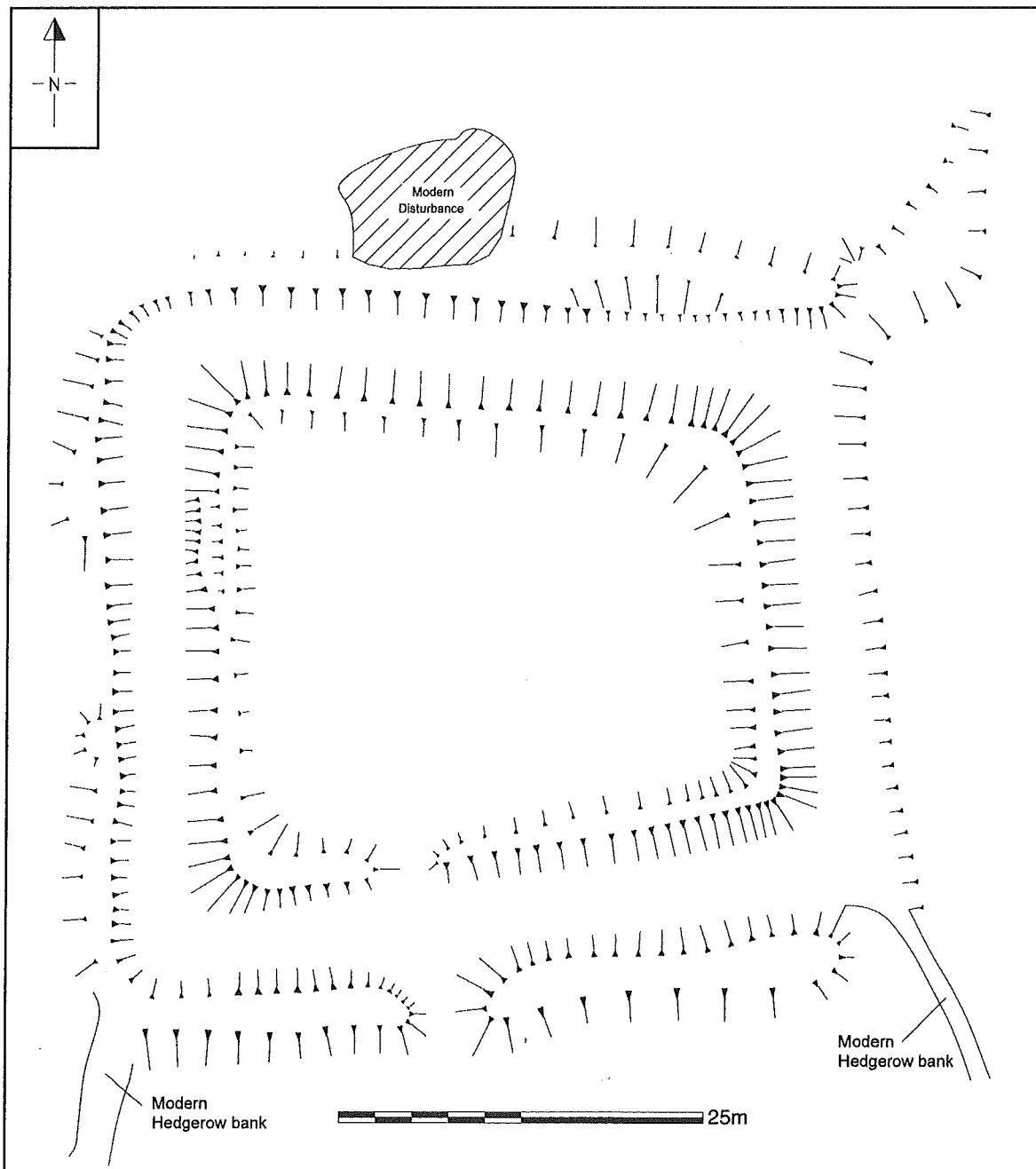


Fig. 3. Moated site at Cloonfree, Co. Roscommon.

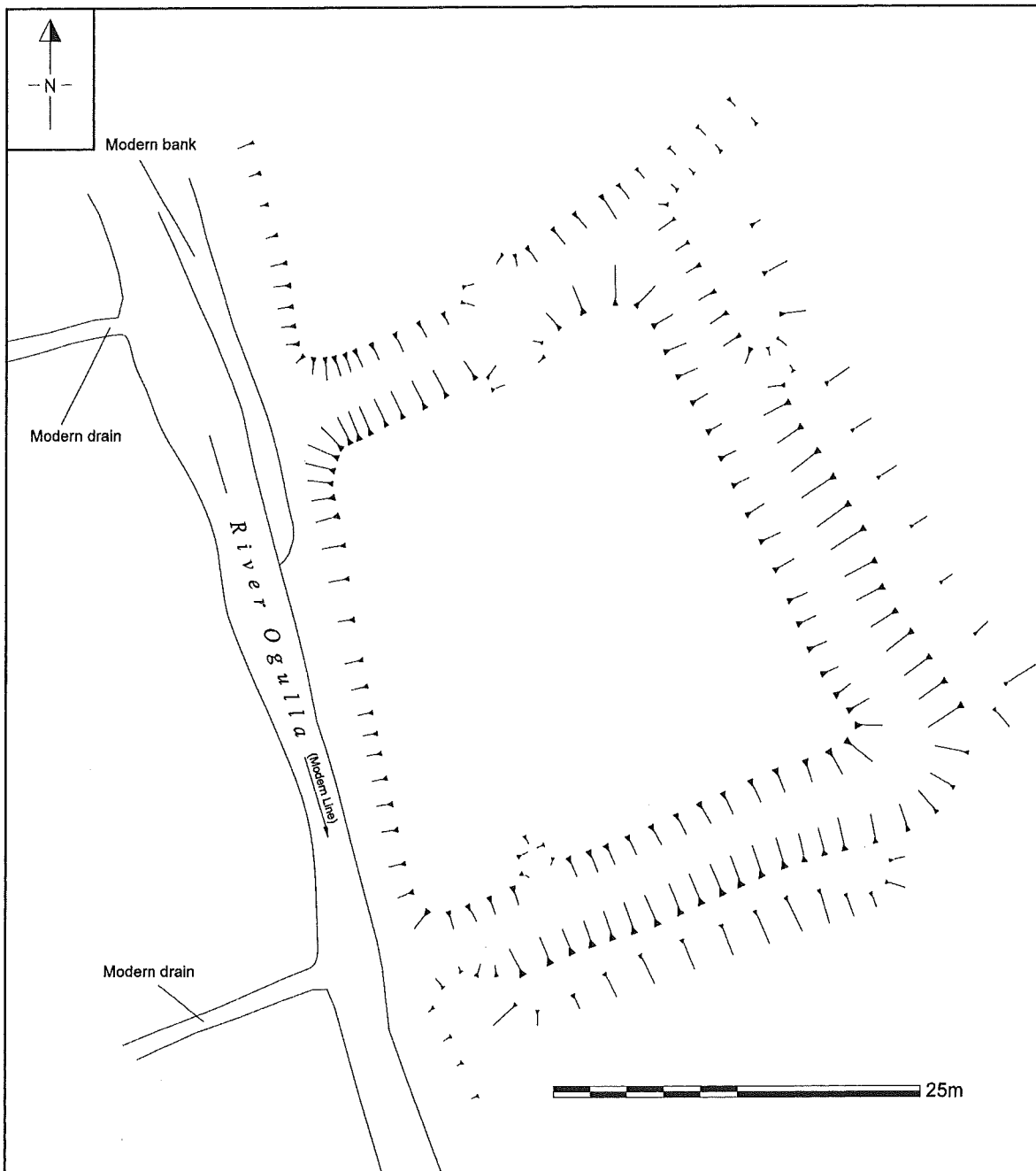


Fig. 4. Moated site at Ogulla, Co. Roscommon.

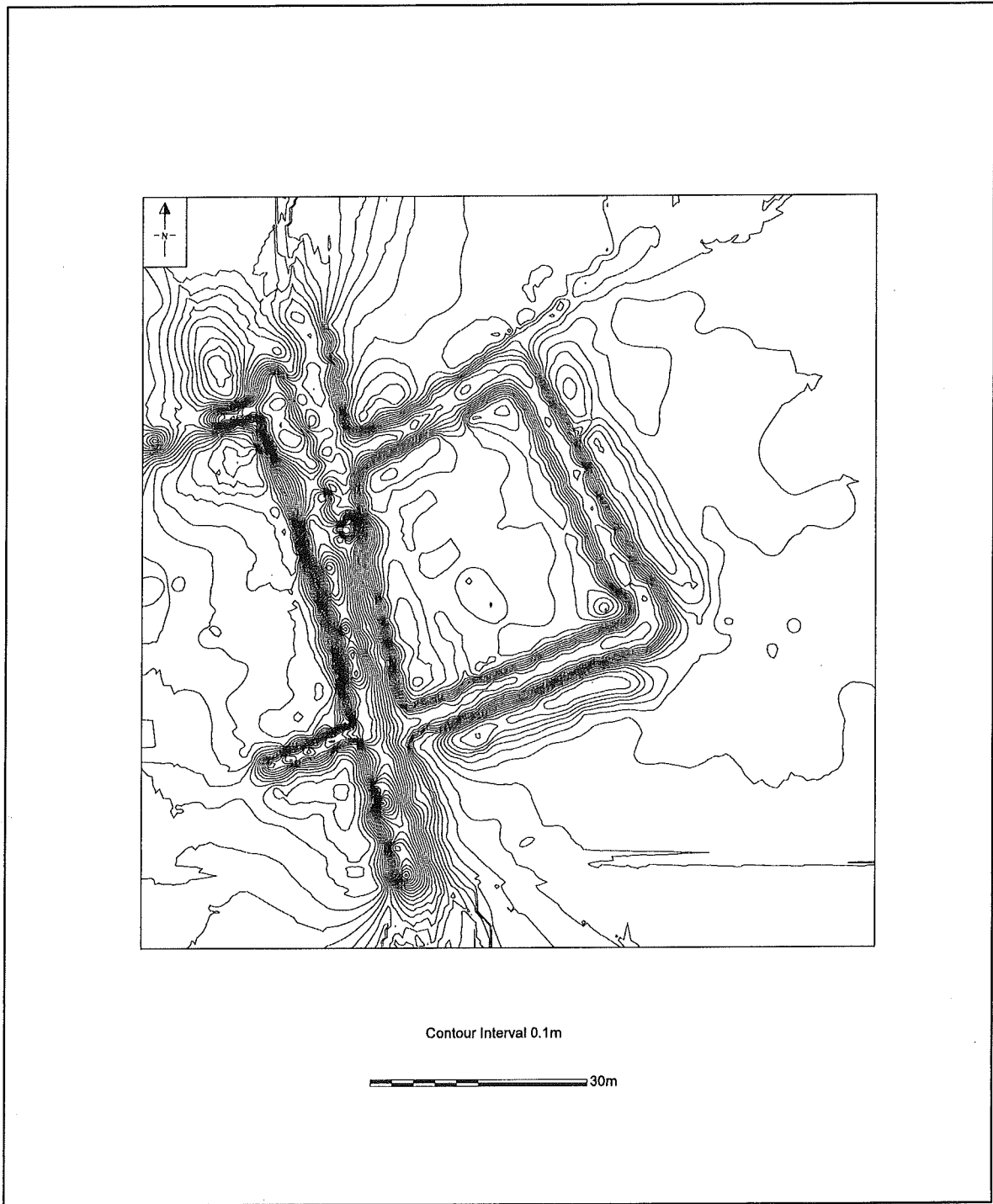


Fig. 5. Contour plan of the moated site at Ogulla, Co. Roscommon.

local fieldname evidence that this 14th century MacDermot *longphort* lay somewhere on Longford Hill close to the latter mansion (*AFM 1856*, 592-593, n.y). This site, however, was never identified on the ground by O'Donovan. Recently, however, fieldwork by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland found the remains of a partially-levelled moated site at the base of Longford Hill opposite the Rock of Lough Key just beside a place marked 'Landing Stage' on the OS map for the area (Mon. No. RO006-202). It is suggested that this moated site is the MacDermot *longphort* mentioned in the 14th century (*O'Conor 1998*, 87). It presumably acted as the de-facto farm and administrative centre for MacDermot lands in the immediate area, with farm buildings and stables within it. Obviously such functions could not be carried out from the Rock itself, as it was located out in the Lough. Probably a dryland residence for the MacDermots also occurred within the site (*ibid.*).

The available historical sources also suggest that Inishatirra Island, located in Drumharlow Lough, Co. Roscommon, was also a centre of the MacDermots by the beginning of the 14th century, if not long before (*O'Conor 1998*, 82). The island was still in the hands of the latter family during the early 17th century (*MacDermot 1996*, 88, 446, 469). Inishatirra Island is a drumlin island of about 22 acres and is now under pasture. The archaeological remains on the island today consist of a fine almost square moated site, with a large ditched oval enclosure attached onto its whole north-eastern side. In all, the evidence suggests that this moated site was built by MacDermot lords of Moylurg, as one of their main residences sometime in the early 14th century, possibly earlier (*O'Conor 1998*, 82).

Dungar or modern Frenchpark, Co. Roscommon, was part of the medieval territory of a junior and subordinate branch of the latter sept. A Dominican priory was founded here in the 14th century, hinting that Dungar was an important medieval centre. A large moated site exists to the north of the modern village in the present townland on Frenchpark Demesne. This impressive earthwork was presumably another MacDermot residence during the medieval period (*O'Conor 1998*, 87).

Another of these north Roscommon moated sites is the wedge-shaped one near the site of medieval parish church at Ogulla, near Tulsk, just a few miles to the west of Cloonfree (*Fig. 4*; Mon. No. RO028-014). Another moated site lies close to Ogulla in the townland of Carrowgarve (Mon. Nno. RO028-061). The cairn at Carnfree, used by the O'Conors as an inauguration site throughout much of the medieval period, occurs in the vicinity of these latter two moated sites, as do various pre-modern field-systems (*AC 1944*, 9, 29, 223, 235, 401). This area of Roscommon seems never to have been colonised and settled by the Anglo-Normans during the medieval period (*Graham 1988a*, 22-23, 30). In all, it is clear that both the archaeological and historical evidence suggests that the townlands of Ogulla and Carrowgarve were a major focus for Gaelic-Irish settlement during the 13th and 14th centuries. The main point here is that these moated sites at Ogulla and Carrowgarve are best interpreted as O'Conor residences during the latter two centuries.

A recent contour plan done of the above-mentioned moated site at Ogulla has located what seems to be possibly the remains of an original building or house within the earthwork (*Fig. 5*). This structure is aligned north-west / south-east and it is noteworthy that this is the usual alignment of traditional houses and farmsteads in the region today. The existence of a possible medieval house within the moated site at Ogulla means that this site is a likely candidate for future excavation.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it appears that the function of moated sites in medieval Ireland was more complex than had once been thought by Irish archaeologists in the 1970's. A number may well have been the homes of minor and unimportant Anglo-Norman lords such as at Rigsdale. Some must have marked the location of granges on scattered Anglo-Norman monastic estates but it is surprising how little work has been carried out and published on this particular aspect of moated sites in medieval Ireland. It is suggested that others are best interpreted as the defended farmsteads of well-to-do peasants of English origin, working their land in various townlands away from manorial centres.

The evidence from Co. Roscommon shows that some Irish moated sites functioned as the defended residences of Gaelic kings and lords of the highest rank. It is quite clear that the O'Conors and the MacDermots were among the most powerful Gaelic septs in the country during the 13th and 14th century. Militarily these lords were well able to gather the resources and forces to take important Anglo-Norman castles on the edges

of their territories, such as the de Burgh one at Ballintober, Co. Roscommon, built c. 1300, and the royal fortress at Roscommon, mostly erected in the late 1270's (e.g. *AC 1944*, 159, 169, 233).

In north Roscommon throughout the medieval period, as elsewhere in Ireland, it can be definitely said that Gaelic lords such as the O'Conors and MacDermots also lived in and utilised crannogs and, as noted above, some natural island fortresses (*O'Conor 1998*, 79-84). Crannogs had been used in Ireland since at least the beginning of the Early Christian/Early Medieval period, if not long before. They were a very definite traditional Gaelic-Irish settlement-form and were in use down to the 17th century AD (*O'Sullivan 1998*, 154-156, 168-176). Alternatively, the existence of moated sites in north Roscommon, and, indeed, the evidence for at least one market settlement there shows that Gaelic-Irish lords during the 13th and 14th century were taking on concepts and ideas from their Anglo-Norman neighbours as well. This latter point, however, should not be overemphasised and taken too far. It has been argued elsewhere that Gaelic-Irish lords rarely built castles of European-type because of their military, social and economic structures before they slowly started to erect tower houses from around 1400 or so – one clear major difference between the regions controlled by the latter and Anglo-Norman dominated areas of medieval Ireland (*O'Conor 1998*, 75-77, 94-101). It was argued above that in colonial areas of medieval Ireland, moated sites were not the centres of Anglo-Norman lords of the highest social standing. The fact that we can identify some moated sites as the homes of the highest-ranking Gaelic-Irish kings and lords is more proof to me that they put far less time, labour and resources into their habitations and fortresses in comparison to Anglo-Norman lords of similar status. Simply, Gaelic-Irish high-status settlement sites made far less of an impact on the landscape of medieval Ireland in contrast to what was done by the Anglo-Normans. This has made medieval Gaelic-Irish settlement especially of 13th and 14th century date difficult to recognise in the modern landscape.

This has to be one of the major reasons why so little archaeological work has been carried out to date on medieval Gaelic Ireland in comparison to colonial settlement. This difficulty in recognising Gaelic-Irish sites of 13th and 14th century date makes the identification of these O'Conor and MacDermot moated sites in Roscommon important. Future work and particularly excavation at these sites will hopefully answer many questions about the nature of medieval Gaelic society, particularly so as historical sources containing detailed socio-economic information about native Irish medieval lordships are virtually non-existent. This lack of surviving historical sources suggests that the discipline of archaeology has a huge role to play in understanding medieval Gaelic Ireland.

One last further, perhaps obvious, point needs to be made. The identification of a series of Gaelic-Irish moated sites in Roscommon must surely mean that other examples of this monument-type throughout Ireland could well have been erected by the latter ethnic group. It has recently been suggested that some moated sites in Co. Tipperary may have been built and occupied by the Gaelic-Irish of that region (Mark Hennessey, TCD, *pers. comm.*).

The moated site series in Co. Sligo just to the north of Roscommon is also interesting from this point of view. Most of this modern county had come under the general control of Anglo-Norman lords by the late 1230's. Many Gaelic lords remained as landholders in the area after the latter date, paying tribute to an Anglo-Norman overlord. The latter regained total control of the county during the 14th century (*O'Dowd 1991*, 13-15). The Archaeological Survey of Ireland during the course of its fieldwork in Sligo during the early 1990's increased the known number of moated sites in the county to 33 (*O'Conor 1998*, 88). This was hailed by certain archaeologists in the local press there as indicating that this meant that there had been far greater Anglo-Norman and English rural settlement in Sligo during the 13th and early 14th century than had hitherto been believed by scholars, despite the fact that the surviving colonial sources suggested otherwise. Increased moated sites to such scholars meant increased colonial rural settlement in any given area. Given the situation in adjacent Roscommon and the fact that many Gaelic lords remained in de-facto local control in many parts of the county, surely at least some of these 33 Sligo moated sites were built and occupied by these Irish lords. Surely this is the best way, for example, to interpret this evidence from Knocklough, Co. Sligo, which sees a moated site acting as some sort of dryland service site for an offshore presumably Gaelic crannog (*O'Conor 1998*, 88).

In all, the main point of this paper was to show that moated sites in medieval Ireland were not solely an Anglo-Norman phenomenon.

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En Irlande les sites fossoyés furent traditionnellement vus comme les restes des habitations et des fermes des petits-seigneurs anglo-normans. On croyait qu'ils étaient construits vers la fin du treizième siècle et pendant la première partie du quatorzième siècle comme protection contre la manqué d'ordre générale et contre les attaques des Irlandais gaéliques indigènes. A la base de travaux récents on ne croit plus que la plupart des sites fossoyés de l'est d'Irlande soient l'oeuvre de ces petits-seigneurs. Par contre, ces sites ont été construits par des paysans relativement riches, dont la plupart étaient anglais de race ou d'origine. Cet exposé propose qu'un groupe de sites fossoyés dans la région qui s'appelle, aujourd'hui, le comté de Roscommon, a été construit par les plus importants des seigneurs d'origine irlandais-gaélique. En tout, l'objet de cet exposé est de montrer qu'en Irlande les sites fossoyés furent construits par une gamme de groupes différents. Les sites fossoyés de l'Irlande médiévale n'étaient pas un phénomène lié uniquement aux seigneurs anglo-normans.

DER ETHNISCHE CHARAKTER VON "MOATED SITES" IN IRLAND

In traditioneller Sicht sind "moated sites" bisher als die Überreste der Residenzen Farmzentren des niederen anglo-normannischen Ritterstandes angesehen worden. Sie sind als Denkmäler betrachtet worden, die während des späten 13. und frühen 14. Jahrhunderts als Schutz gegen die allgemeine Gesetzlosigkeit und gegen die Überfälle einheimischer galischen Iren erbaut wurden. Neure Forschungsarbeit deutet jedoch darauf hin, daß viele dieser "moated sites", die in der östlichen Hälfte Irlands zu finden sind, nicht dem niederen Ritterstand zuzuschreiben sind, sondern tatsächlich von relativ wohlhabenden Bauern meist englischen Ursprungs oder Abstammung erbaut wurden. Im Kontext dieses Referats wird auch hervorgehoben, daß eine Reihe von "moated sites" in der modernen Grafschaft Roscommon von gälisch irischen Herren des höchsten Ranges erbaut wurden. Zusammenfassend ist der Hauptpunkt dieses Referats, zu zeigen, daß "moated sites" von unterschiedlichen Bevölkerungsgruppen in Irland errichtet wurden. "Moated sites" sind nicht als ausschließlich anglo-normannisches Herrschaftsphenomen im mittelalterlichen Irland anzusehen.

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