RURAL SETTLEMENT
AND CULTURAL IDENTITY
IN GAELIC IRELAND, 1000-1500

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This paper is an exploration of the processes and patterns of settlement in Gaelic Ireland in the first half of the present millennium. A number of themes are discussed: continuity of settlement type from the pre-Viking period, the changes in landscape organisation in the aftermath of the Vikings and their significance, and the origin of the tower-house, the small private castle that was popular among Gaelic families.

Medieval Ireland: a land of frontiers

Few dates in history resonate so vigorously in the consciousness of the Irish nation as 1169. The arrival in south-east Ireland on Mayday of that year of a fleet of ships carrying thirty Norman knights and several hundred soldiers was in response to an invitation from an exiled Irish king for mercenary assistance (*Flanagan 1989*; *Martin 1987*), but the subsequent colonisation of the island by the Normans should be seen in the context of the migratory movements of both military aristocracies and peasant populations across 12th century Europe (*A. Simms 1988*; *Bartlett 1989*). By the end of the 12th century the eastern and south-eastern third of Ireland had foisted upon it a substantial Anglo-Norman colony, complete with a network of towns and castles. The native population here was consumed within the colony's social hierarchy at levels ranging from *betagii*, unfree labourers equivalent to English villeins (*Otway-Ruthven 1951*), to free tenants (*Nicholls 1982*, 373-6; *McNeill 1975*, 38). Even in Gaelic Ireland, those lands further to the west into which the settlers never successfully ventured, native kings were obliged to recognise the nominal overlordship of the Anglo-Normans and to pay homage and tribute to the Angevin kings (*K. Simms 1987*, 13-14).

Relationships in the 13th century between the native Gaelic population, with its ethnic roots buried deep in the prehistoric past, and the kaleidoscope of 'nationalities' of which the colony was comprised (*Lydon 1984*; *Phillips 1984*; *Richter 1979*), were complex, and they varied according to locality and region. If generalisation is possible, Ireland's history in the two centuries subsequent to 1169 can perhaps be characterised in terms of shifting and never coterminous frontiers of culture, territory and psychology between the two population groups. Given the diverse origins of the colonial aristocracy and the circumstances in which they established their foothold in Ireland, the colony was neither politically nor culturally homogenous, but was comprised instead of semi-autonomous lordships and earldoms, each with its own settlement dynamic and landscape identity (*O'Keeffe 1995*). Equally, the Gaelic society into which the Normans intruded had its mosaic of independent kingdoms, and while Ruaidhrí Ó Conchobhair, king of Connacht in the west of Ireland at the time of the Norman arrival, aspired to the role of national monarch, the movement towards centralised power and theocratic kingship in which he participated was effectively derailed by the Norman arrival (*K. Simms 1987*, 12-13). The nature of the frontier - the buffer zone - between the colonial and Gaelic worlds from the late 1100s reflected this complexity: while boundaries were sometimes sustained by peaceful rela-

tions between the populations, elsewhere and at other times the frontier was nourished by tension, in response to which the Normans sprinkled castles heavily along their exposed flanks.

The processes by which the colony decayed in the 14th century were engendered by the mechanisms which allowed the two worlds to co-exist on the island in the 12th and 13th centuries. Where a militarised frontier had once kept the populations apart, the Irish forcibly reclaimed land causing the colonial area to contract. And where an equilibrium had been attained through cultural interaction between the natives and the settlers, the colonial identity eroded through cultural assimilation. By the 15th century this "gaelicisation" had created a new population group bearing English family names but Gaelic in its broad cultural affiliation and identified as rebellious by the crown (*Cosgrove 1979; Lydon 1984,* 13-15). By the end of the 1500s, however, the English crown had, by astute political manoeuvring, restored its interest and the scale of its influence in Ireland, and it effectively ushered in the end of the middle ages and the beginning of the modern era (*Cosgrove 1981*).

Gaelic settlement visibility:
ringforts in the high middle ages

Our perception of the complex frontier relationships between the two Irelands in the 12th, 13th and 14th centuries is informed principally by the written testament and landscape remains of the colonial population, and is therefore markedly anglocentric. Given its achievement in the 14th century of frustrating the colony and draining its resources, and in transforming the political and cultural affiliation of a number of influential colonial families to the extent that they were recognised as enemies of the crown, it is curious, if not perverse, that the native Gaelic population should be largely invisible in the archaeological record of the period, except when its highest social levels manifest themselves in the patronage of churches and, in the 15th and 16th centuries, in the building of tower-houses.

This invisibility might be explained in terms of settlement and land-use configurations that remained largely unchanged since pre-Norman times and which cannot therefore be distinguished easily as being of the period under review. The hypothesis of settlement continuity has revolved largely around the ringfort or rath, an embanked and ditched penannular enclosure averaging 30 m in internal diameter (*Edwards 1990,* 6-33). The great antiquarian T. J. Westropp estimated some 30,000 examples still extant in the mid-19th century (*Westropp 1902*). The term "ringfort" conveys the impression that these were monuments of defence, but the enclosing banks and ditches protected rather than defended the domestic and ancillary structures inside, and they also served to demarcate areas of private or family space on the landscape.

Although there is some micro-scale clustering of ringfort sites, as at Cush, county Limerick (*Ó Riordáin 1940*), the pattern of ringfort distribution is generally dispersed, and the grouping of several buildings within the embankments represents the only level of nucleation that is consistently attested archaeologically. For decades it was supposed that *clachans*, comparatively shapeless agglomerations of houses associated with infield-outfield farming that were mapped by the Ordnance Survey in the 1800s, represented unenclosed nucleations that co-existed with ringforts and embraced lower social classes (*Proudfoot 1959*), but the case for assigning these house clusters to the recent rather than the ancient past is strong (*Leister 1976,* 10-11; *Burtchaell 1988,* 121).

Archaeological investigation of ringforts, albeit on a mere 200 or so examples (*Edwards 1990,* 11), points consistently to the middle and later 1st millennium AD as the period of construction of the greater number of these monuments (*Lynn 1975a; Mytum 1992,* 132). Ringforts are deceptively simple earthworks and possess no outward sign of date, and the question of how many of the forts in any given area actually functioned at any one moment of time is a matter that could only be resolved by excavation on a massive scale. Complicating the issue further is evidence that some sites, most notably one of the Garryduff forts in county Cork (*O'Kelly 1963,* 120-5), appear not to have been used as habitations. Moreover, excavations at a number of sites, notably at Lissue, county Down (*Bersu 1947*) and Lisleagh I, county Cork (*Monk 1994*), have revealed not just multi-phase occupation histories within static ramparts, but clear evidence that ramparts themselves could sometimes be cleared away and new ones erected in their place. Unless one assumes
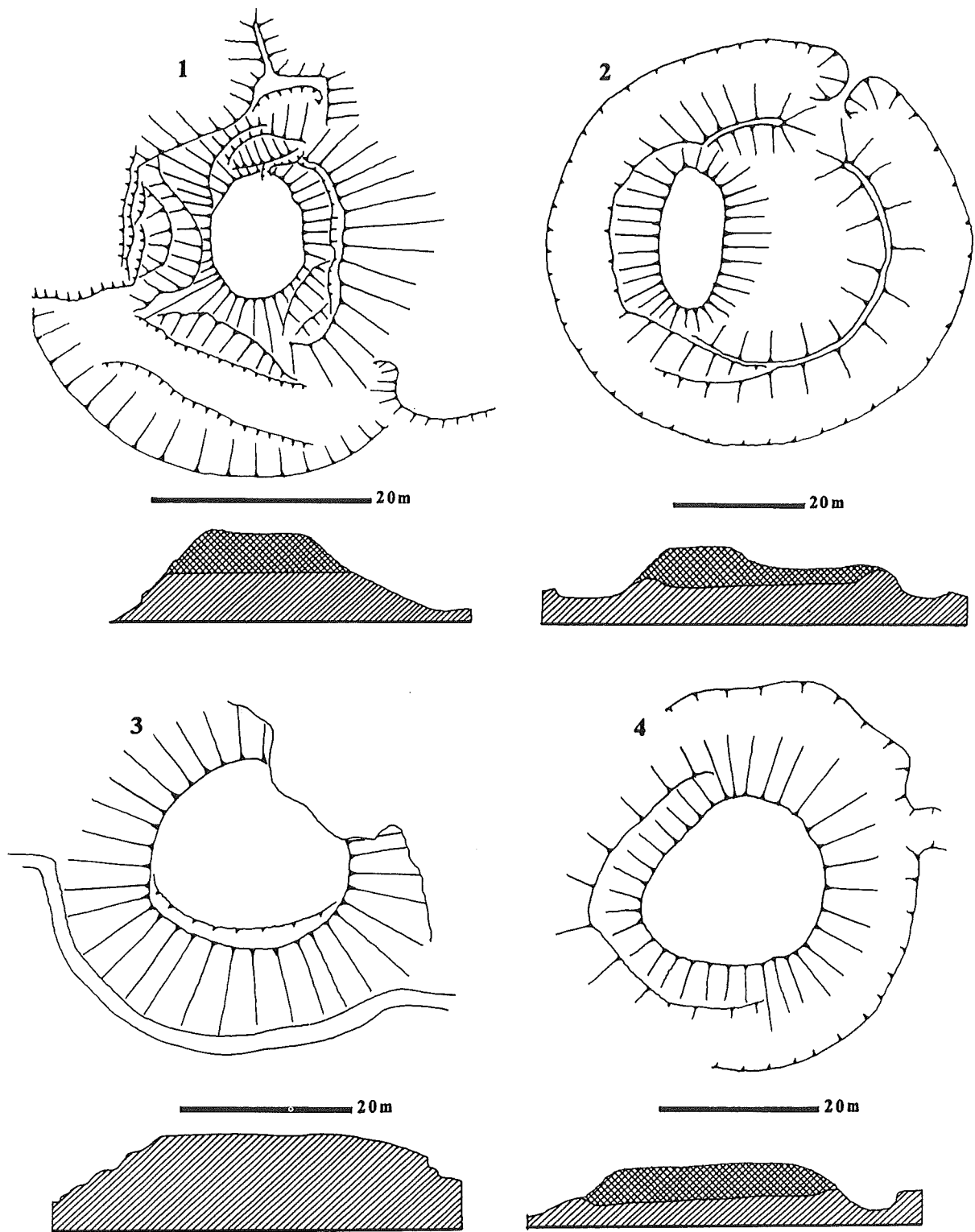
Fig. 1. Plans and sections of settlement earthworks. 1: Rathmullen (settlement mound and motte) after *Lynn 1981-2*; 2: Castle Skreen (ringfort, motte and bailey) after *Dickinson - Waterman 1959*; 3: Gransha (settlement mound) after *Lynn 1985*; 4: Lismahon (motte), after *Waterman 1959*.

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steady population growth during the half-millennium or so (AD 600-1000) in which the majority of the ring-forts are believed to have been built, there must have been many forts that were abandoned, temporarily or permanently, at any one period of time.

There may be an *a priori* reason for thinking that ringforts remained in use among the Gaelic Irish in the 12th century and later: although they are found all over the island, both inside and outside the area of the Norman colony, there is no other settlement type in the pre-modern landscape of Gaelic Ireland in which we might visualise the greater part of the native population living at this time. There is, however, implied in the theory of ringfort continuity, either of occupation or construction, a degree of social and cultural stagnation from the end of the first millennium to at least the 15th century when wealthier Gaelic landowners embraced the fashion for tower-houses, but this cannot be easily reconciled with the pro-European spirit of Gaelic soci-ety after the turn of the millennium, or indeed with Gaelic Ireland's successful territorial and psychological assault on the Norman colony in the 14th century. On the contrary, the consistency with which archaeology produces dates in the first millennium suggests that there was an actual process of ringfort desertion at the end of that millennium. The fact that forts were not later reoccupied in large numbers underscores the magni-tude of the change. As there was no process of resettlement, it would seem that where there was later reuse of ringforts, that reuse - which Lynn estimates at between 5 % and 15 % (*Lynn 1975b*, 30) - was in most cases entirely incidental. Rather than interpret Donnchad Ó Briain's making of "a circular fort and princely palace of earth" at Clonroad, county Clare, in the 1240s (*Caithréim Thoirdelbhaigh* ii, 2) as a survival of a rather ar-chaic mode of enclosure and construction, one might place his choice in the context of the renewed interest in Gaelic traditions, among them inauguration rites and art styles, which is strongly attested from the 14th century or earlier (*K. Simms 1987*, 15-17). The enclosing of properties with earthen ramparts akin to those of ringforts is historically attested in the 16th century (*Ormond Deeds*: 1547-84, no. 11; *Ormond Deeds*: 1584-1603, nos 31, 32), but expediency rather than an affinity with the ringfort concept probably explains these enclosures.

From ringfort to castle: society and landscape transformed

The abandonment of ringforts towards the end of the first millennium has been tentatively linked with changes in "concepts of warfare" associated with the Viking attacks and with subsequent internecine con-flicts (*Lynn 1975b*, 33). Viking activity in the 9th century certainly contributed in large measure to radical changes in the 10th century in society and politics, particularly in the nature and role of kingship (*Ó Corráin 1972*, 29-32), and to concomitant changes in the organisation and use of landscape. The appearance in the post-Viking period of the terms *óglachas*, 'the service of a warrior', *biataigheacht*, 'a food-providing rela-tionship', and *tuarastal* and *innarrad*, which apply to the wages of mercenaries (*K. Simms 1987*, 101), articulates an increasing level of military activity and the restructuring of social obligations needed to sup-port it. There emerged at this time the *trícha cét* (or, literally, the "thirty hundreds"), a hierarchy of land units devised for the purpose of supporting military campaigns (*Hogan 1920*; *Patterson 1994*, 170-3; *Ó Cróinín 1995*, 275-6). The *trícha cét*, spatially coterminous with the *tuatha* or kingdoms of early medieval Ireland, and with the largest administrative units employed by the Normans (*Patterson 1994*, 92-3), is fossilised in the modern townlands, the smallest territorial divisions in the Irish landscape (*Duffy 1981*; *McErlean 1983*). While *Stout* (*1991*) has used the townland pattern in his assessment of the social functioning and spatial con-figuration of ringforts, a spatial coincidence between townland boundaries and the largest earthen boundaries of an extensive field system has been documented in north-central Roscommon, and that field system, laid out to facilitate cattle husbandry, is demonstrably later than the ringforts of the area (*Herity 1988*), suggest-ing that the townland system post-dates the ringfort phenomenon.

The appearance in the Irish landscape of settlements on the summits of mounds that were especially built for the purpose (*Fig. 1*) may have begun around the time that the *trícha cét* was instituted, and it certainly continued into the Norman era. Pre-Norman settlement mounds, described as 'raised' and 'platform' ring-forts (*Edwards 1990*, 14) but quite unlike conventional ringforts in the high elevation of their interiors, are

especially well-known from Ulster (and especially from county Down) where excavation has revealed their chronology. Gransha (*Fig. 1:3*; Lynn 1985), Big Glebe (*Hamlin - Lynn 1988*, 41-4) and Deer Park Farms (*Hamlin - Lynn 1988*, 44-7) fall within the category. Their profiles are comparable to those of Norman mottes, and indeed the settlement mound at Rathmullen (*Fig. 1:1*; Lynn 1981-2) was converted into a motte by the Normans. These monuments can be interpreted (*Graham 1993*, 42-4) as manifestations of the pan-European phenomenon at the close of the first millennium AD of building defended mounds (*Higham - Barker 1992*, 78-113). Conventional ringforts were also converted in the post-1169 period into raised earthworks, either by the Normans or by the Gaelic Irish: Castle Skreen had a motte raised at one side of the enclosure while its interior was converted into a bailey (*Fig. 1:2*; Dickinson - Waterman 1959), and Lismahon appears to have had a ringfort converted into a motte by the native Irish (*Fig. 1:4*; Waterman 1959).

The concentration of pre-Norman settlement mounds in eastern Ulster is probably a consequence of a greater number of excavations carried out there, particularly of mottes and apparent mottes. Indeed, the evidence of excavation in north-east Ireland suggests that in the late 12th and early 13th centuries mottes were less likely to have been raised on virgin ground than on extant earthworks. Perhaps the deliberate recasting by the Normans of native earthworks that were, in the late 12th century, of recent antiquity (as distinct from ringforts that were long abandoned), might be seen as a corollary to their deliberate choice of native church sites when boroughs were being created (*Graham 1980*, Tab. 2).

The Normans in the Earldom of Ulster were probably not alone in their propensity to reuse earlier settlement earthworks, and the scarcity of mounded settlement earthworks of apparent pre-Norman date in other parts of Norman Ireland may be because they await discovery at the cores of mottes. Beyond Ulster, Béal Ború in county Clare, a fortification destroyed in 1116 and reused by the Normans a century later (*O'Kelly 1962*), might be seen in the same archaeological context as those Ulster sites listed above.

If the concept of 'castle' is one of the accoutrements of feudalism, the mounds of Gransha (*Fig. 1:3*) and Big Glebe may well merit that appellation. Products of a society that was becoming increasingly feudal in the two centuries before the consummation in 1169 of Ireland's ever-growing engagement with Europe, they possess the appropriate morphological forms. In the half-century before the Normans arrive the term 'castle' (*caistél or caislén*) even appears in the Gaelic vocabulary (*Flanagan 1996*, 61), and while all the recorded examples of pre-Norman "castles" have been destroyed, *Nicholls* (1982, 389) has noted that an early 18th century description of the then-extant example of Ballinasloe, *Dún Leocha*, suggests a morphology comparable with a motte.

Land, Village and Community: nucleated settlement in Gaelic Ireland

Increasing lordship control was the circumstance that produced villages and their associated open-field systems in late Anglo-Saxon England (*Hall 1981*; 1985). Given that comparison between the *trícha cét* and the *Burghal Hidage* in Anglo-Saxon England is inviting and appropriate (*Patterson 1994*, 173; Ó Cróinín 1995, 275), one might expect the cultural landscape of Ireland to have experienced a transformation similar to that of England. Open-field farming of a type similar to that found in late Saxon and Norman England may have been in operation in Ireland long before the institution of the *trícha cét*: the alternation of arable strips between members of a community may well have been devised as early as the 7th or 8th century (*Doherty 1982*, 308), while a text of the 10th century or earlier indicates that the laying side-by-side of "arable ridges" expressed "mutual assistance and friendliness" between two dynasties (*Charles-Edwards 1993*, 419). There is evidence, however, that a process of nucleation also accompanied the institution of the *trícha cét* in contemporary Ireland.

The word *baile* (anglicised as *Bally-*) appears as a prefix in two of the named subdivisions of the *trícha cét*, the *baile biattagh* (a 'feeding place') and *baile bó* (a ploughland). By comparing the distributions of *baile* place-names and ringforts, *Proudfoot* (1959) suggested that *baile* represents an unenclosed nucleation contemporary with the ringforts, but the contexts in which *baile* appears suggest that it describes a landscape phenomenon, or phenomena, contemporaneous with the *trícha cét*. The use of *baile* as a place-name element

in the *trícha cét* hierarchy suggests the word denoted 'place', but *baile* sometimes appears in contexts, pre- and post-1169, which suggest that it refers to a village or town, as at Dún Echdach or Duneight (*AFM* sub anno 1010), Galway (*MC* sub anno 1132); Athlone (*ALC* sub anno 1218), the Brosna river valley (*AC* sub anno 1264), and Sligo (*ALC* sub anno 1257). In some of these cases, including at the royal site of Dún Ech-dach in the early 1000s, fortifications are attested either historically or archaeologically, and one might reasonably suggest that *baile* settlements were defended or protected, and perhaps also that their creation, in-itially at least, was a royal prerogative. These settlements must also have had associated churches: early medieval Ireland possessed "one of the most comprehensive pastoral organisations in northern Europe" (*Sharpe 1992*, 109), and the territorial scheme devised to exact the resources needed for military campaign-ing provided the church with an embryonic parish system. The coincidence of church and nucleated settlement in Gaelic Ireland of the period is best expressed in the "monastic towns" (*Doherty 1985*): monas-tic sites that attracted settlement complete with the secondary and tertiary industries that may be taken to constitute "urbanism".

In the period between the Vikings and the Normans, then, one might envisage a landscape which pos-sessed nucleated settlements, complete with churches and fortifications, which were the result of royal initiative. Did nucleations exist at lower social levels? Two landscapes - the landscape of the Normans and the landscape of modern Ireland - may provide a clue.

The modern landscape, first of all, provides the firmest evidence that Ireland never acquired a pattern of villages comparable with that in England or on the Continent: Ireland is today a land of dispersed settlement, and the towns and villages that do exist can largely be attributed to high medieval or later plantations. Had widespread village formation accompanied the creation of the *trícha cét* one might expect greater levels of settlement nucleation in modern Ireland, at least in those areas that remained untouched by the Normans. A large proportion of the population may have continued to reside outside of the nucleations which, it is sug-gested here, were associated with the *trícha cét*. Self-regulating communities which were bonded by kinship and personal contracts, and which exploited the land as co-operative rather than collective units, are known from the pre-Viking Irish laws relating to *comaithches* or 'neighbourhood' (*Kelly 1988*, 102). Their actual residences seem not to have been arranged in tight spatial configurations that might entice us to use the word village, but to have had blocks of fenced land separating them (*Charles-Edwards 1993*, 416-20). The *co-maithches* does not then represent the village in embryo; rather, the natural path of its evolution may have been towards dispersed households, not nucleation.

Within the Norman landscape, secondly, the territorial system of the Gaelic Irish was adopted with little alteration, and so the geography of the administrative organisation of the landscape remained unchanged be-tween the 10th and 13th centuries. Unlike in contemporary England, the settlement hierarchy inside the colony was polarised: there were settlements that had borough or market status at one end of the spectrum, and dispersed settlements (moated sites and low status mottes) at the other, but virtually no village settlement in between. There is merit in the suggestion that the townland system was too deeply incised in the landscape for the comparatively small number of Norman settlers to affect any significant change (*A. Simms 1983*, 146). One might further suggest that the Normans also inherited and sustained a hierarchy of settlement.

A model of the evolution of the Irish landscape from 800 to 1200 is presented in *Figure 2*. This hypo-thetical landscape is located in the east of Ireland, the area controlled by the Normans from the late 12th century, and so the landscape of 1200 shows the superimposition of the Norman polity. Continuity of territo-rial organisation is evident in the boundaries of the tuath, the *trícha cét* and the barony. Lower down the territorial hierarchy, the Ballybetagh (one of the names given to the principal subdivisions of a *trícha cét*: *McErlean 1983*, 317) manifests itself in the Norman landscape as a manor, with the subdivisions of the Bal-lybetagh (or its equivalent) manifesting themselves as small manorial and sub-manorial holdings. A dispersed settlement pattern comprised of ringforts in 800 gives way in 1000 to a pattern of clustering around church sites and settlement mounds, and these clusters provide the administrative and settlement foci in 1200 for the Normans who, having refortified the earlier settlement mounds, then disperse back into the country-side, first with mottes and then with moated sites.

Not represented in this model is the Gaelic population within the Norman landscape. *MacCourt (1971)* suggested that within the confines of the colony the Irish were allowed to remain where they were and to continue to operate their indigenous farming system, but could the *villa Hybernicorum* in county Kildare in 1318 (*Red Book of Kildare*, no. 139) represent a corralling of subservient Irish into manageable units rather than a pattern of settlement of pre-Norman vintage?
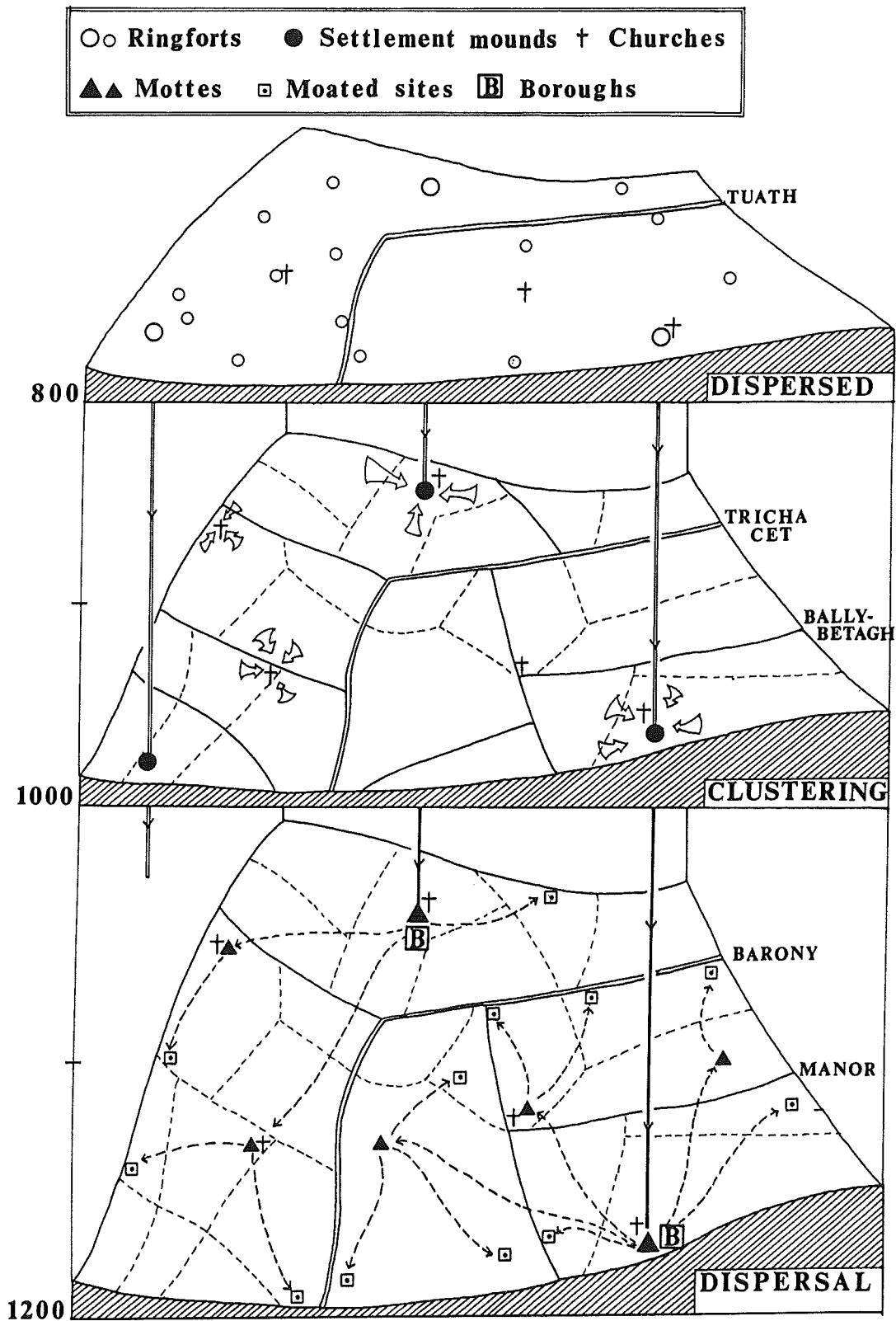
Legend:

Oo Ringforts ● Settlement mounds † Churches
▲▲ Mottes �‣ Moated sites Ⓑ Boroughs

TUATH

800 — DISPERSED

TRICHA CET

BALLY-BETAGH

1000 — CLUSTERING

BARONY

MANOR

1200 — DISPERSAL

Fig. 2. A hypothetical model of the evolution of the landscape of eastern Ireland, 800-1200.

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The documentary emphasis on the warfare that was endemic in 14th century Ireland is something of a smoke screen behind which some important social processes took place. The dilution during this period of the ethnic-cultural barriers that were put in place in the late 12th century is best reflected in the emergence during this century of the tower-house, a multi-storeyed defended residence, and in its transgression of political divides. By the middle of the 15th century these private castles were being built by Gaelic Irish families, and by the English families that remained loyal to the crown and those that did not. As many as seven thousand tower-houses may have been built in Ireland (*Barry 1993a*, 108). It is evident, if only from these numbers, that ownership of a private castle filtered lower down the social scale than had been the case two centuries earlier.

Barry regards the absence of tower-houses in Ulster as militating evidence against a Scottish origin for the Irish series (*Barry 1993b*, 211), but his suggestion that the tradition may have had its earliest manifestation in Gaelic areas (*Barry 1993b*, 216) might be challenged on architectural and locational grounds.
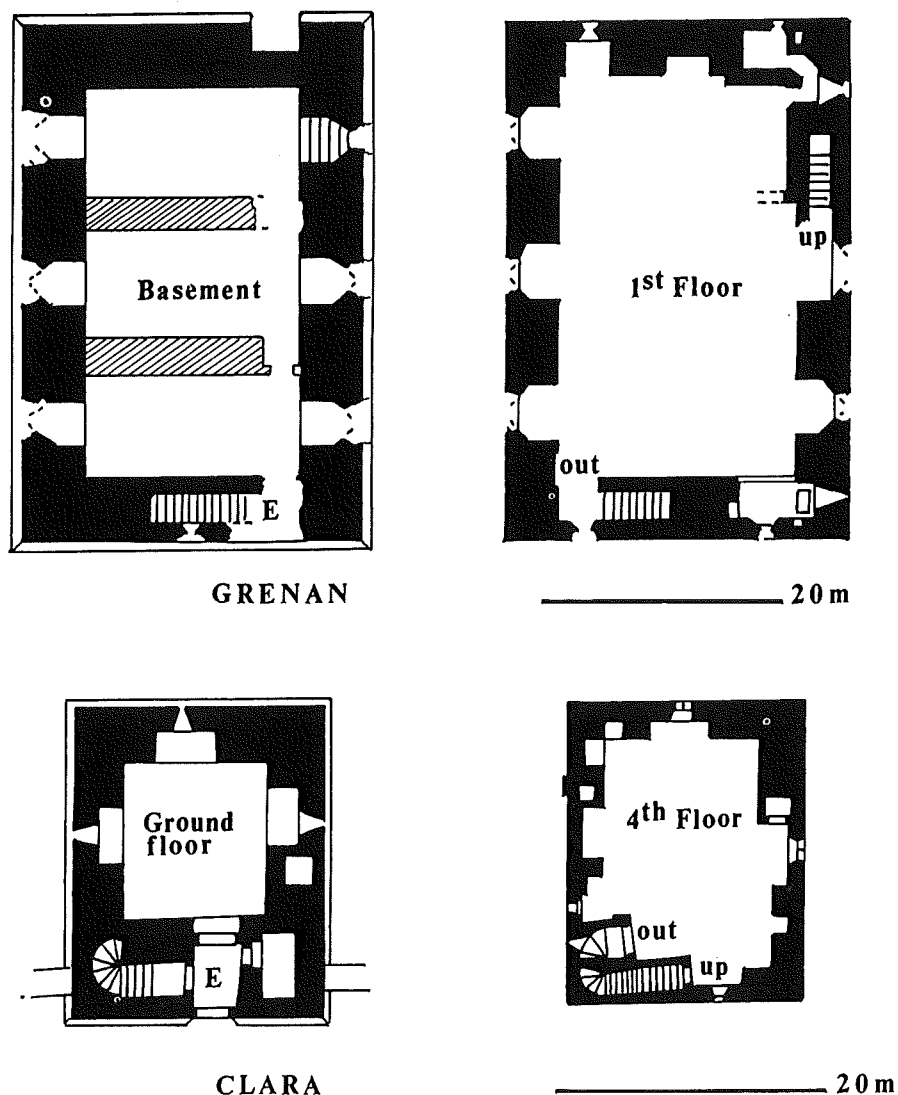

Fig. 3. Plans of Grenan keep (early 13th century) and Clara tower-house (15th century). E: Entrance; out: exit from stairs; up: entry to stairs.

BOROUGHS

MOTTES

Sites per
2500 km²

2 - 5

5 - 10

10 - 15

15 +

MOATED
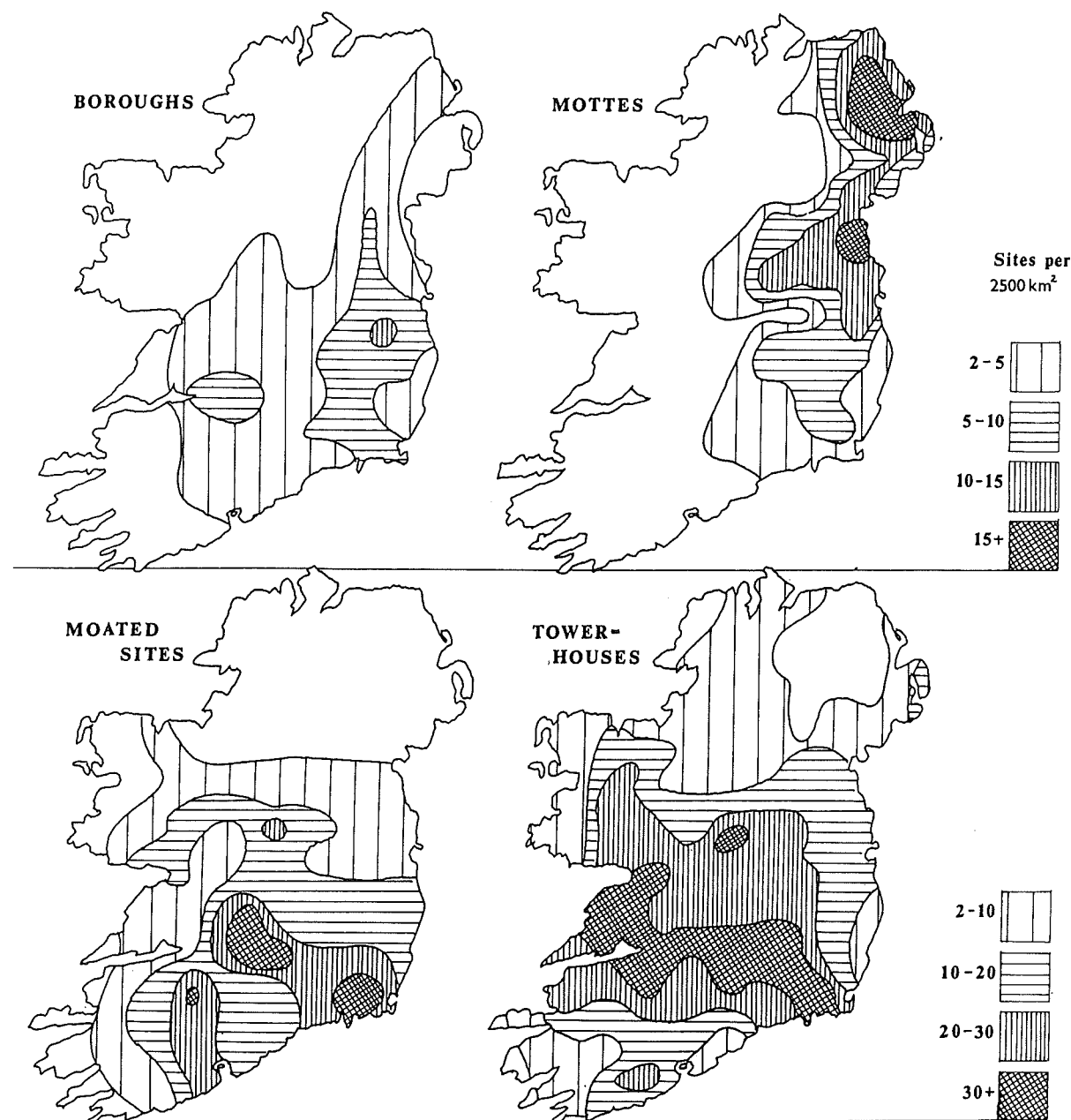SITES

TOWER-
HOUSES

2 - 10

10 - 20

20 - 30

30 +

Fig. 4. Density maps of the distributions of boroughs, mottes, moated sites and tower-houses.

Nothing is known of the layout of the domestic buildings of Gaelic families in the period between the late 12th century and the start of the 15th century. High status residences in stone were probably exceptional in that period, and so there was probably no indigenous tradition from which the Gaelic lords could draw inspiration when they embraced the concept of the private stone-built castle in the late middle ages. The building of high status residences in wattle is attested by Stephen of Lexington, one of the 'visitators' sent to investigate conflict in the Cistercian community of early 13th century Ireland, who observed that Irish kings lived in huts of wattle (*O'Dwyer 1970*, 31), and by Roger of Howden, who tells us that when Henry II travelled to Ireland in 1171 the Irish built for him a palace of "wattles" *ad morem patriae illius* (*Flanagan 1989*, 203).

By contrast, domestic accommodation is well-represented in the repertoire of late 12th and early 13th century Norman architecture in Ireland. The idea of a keep containing the principal private and public chambers was popular in Ireland among the first generations of Norman settlers, but had been abandoned by about 1250 in favour of a decentralised plan form in which the domestic rooms were spread around the defended circuit (*O'Keeffe 1990*). The tower-house represents the restoration of the early 13th century planning

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scheme, and the layout of many tower-houses appears to have been influenced directly by early 13th century keeps. A comparison, for example, between two buildings in county Kilkenny, the early 13th century hall-keep at Grenan (*Waterman 1968*) and the 15th century tower-house at Clara (*Leask 1951*, 79-84), reveals that the stairs begin on the left-hand side of the entrance lobby, that they rise towards the corner, and that in order to ascend higher than main room level in the building it is necessary to leave the stair well or passage and to cross part of the room (*Fig. 3*). These patterns are found in other Norman keeps (the cylindrical keep at Nenagh, county Tipperary, for example), and in the great majority of Irish tower-houses. It may well be, then, that the first tower-houses in Ireland were built in lands held by the Normans in the 13th century and that the earlier keeps provided considerable inspiration.

The circumstantial evidence of the distribution of settlement types of the post-1169 period corroborates this view. Distribution maps of boroughs, mottes, "rectangular earthworks" (the great majority of which are moated sites) and stone castles (most of which are certainly tower-houses) have been published (see *Barry 1987*, Figs 8, 20, 28, 38), and the broad distribution patterns may be represented in distribution density form (*Fig. 4*). The concentrations of boroughs and mottes together represent the geography of the Norman colony in the early 1200s. Moated sites, the water-protected colonial farmsteads which were made between 1225 and 1325 (*Barry 1987*, 93), are found in much greater numbers, and their spread across the southern part of the island is matched by the spread of tower-houses, except that the heaviest concentration of the latter monuments extends further west into Gaelic lands. Many of the tower-house owners in south-central and south-eastern Ireland in the later 14th, 15th and 16th centuries were probably descended from the owners of moated sites in the 13th and early 14th centuries. It seems very likely that the fashion for building tower-houses simply diffused out of this core area into the adjacent parts of the Gaelic world. In the areas of Ireland in which the Norman settlement was restricted or indeed absent, the number of tower-houses is correspondingly low.

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