

SOCIO-ECONOMIC ASPECTS OF IRISH MEDIEVAL SETTLEMENTS

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Introduction

Because we have only just begun, over the last twenty years or so, to even identify a significant number of medieval rural settlements within the Irish landscape it is hardly surprising that there has, as yet, been little concentration on the important socio-economic aspects of these settlements. But this is about to change with the Discovery Programme's new research proposals. The Discovery Programme limited is an archaeological research company funded primarily by Government through the Heritage Council. Its wide-ranging brief is to identify major questions about Ireland's past and to conduct research programmes on various important aspects of this past, which it then publishes as widely as possible. One of the proposed two new research topics, which is of particular interest to *Ruralia*, is that of medieval rural settlement. Over the last six months or so new research proposals on this topic have been produced by Dr. Kieran O'Connor, and these will be published as a monograph in June 1998 by the Discovery Programme. The exciting prospect is that this new research programme will have the capacity to help to answer many important questions on Irish medieval rural settlement, which has hitherto often been neglected in comparison to either prehistory or indeed, more latterly, medieval urban settlement (Barry 1994, 1, 116).

The sites that are discussed here are fairly well known to medievalists in Ireland, and have been studied by many scholars, but this paper attempts to examine them from a different perspective in order to learn more about their socio-economic fundamentals. It is only by examining both these aspects that we can gain a more complete picture of medieval rural settlement in Ireland. If the settlement pattern of Ireland in the early thirteenth century is examined it becomes apparent that in the eastern two-thirds of the country, which was settled by the Anglo-Normans after their successful invasion in 1169-70, there was the introduction of an hierarchical network of nucleated settlements, both rural and urban. This largely replaced the dispersed rural settlements of rural Ireland in the pre-Norman period, although the Anglo-Normans themselves introduced new types of dispersed settlements such as the moated site, which interestingly enough shared many of the functions of the dominant form of pre-Norman rural settlement, the ringfort (Barry 1997, 87). Of course in the remaining western third of the country the settlement probably remained largely dispersed, although there has been much less archaeological research in this area in comparison with that completed on settlement within the Anglo-Norman Lordship. It is hoped that the new research programme to be initiated by the Discovery Programme might redress this imbalance somewhat.

Nucleated settlements

It is to the nucleated settlements of the Anglo-Normans that we need to go for any detailed information about the social structure to be found within rural Ireland in the Middle Ages. The medieval manorial documents that survive can tell us about the different classes of people who inhabited the boroughs and villages set up by the Anglo-Normans from the late twelfth century onwards. Some of the most informative are the many manorial extents and other contemporary documents surviving for the rural borough of Newtown Jerpoint in Co. Kilkenny, located beside the River Nore in a very prosperous part of Anglo-Norman Ireland (Barry 1994, 75-81). Although the inhabitants were granted burgess status to try and attract settlers from Britain many of these settlements were, in reality, villages. Newtown Jerpoint was a very small settlement, with only about 22 burgesses in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century. It also must be a prime candidate for future geophysical survey and excavation in the newly proposed research programme by the Discovery Programme on medieval rural settlement. Not only is there an impressive village earthwork, which was first completely surveyed by the Ordnance Survey in 1839 (*Fig. 1*) but also there is the possible site of the original medieval mill which is mentioned in the medieval extents. There are also the important Cistercian abbey of Jerpoint nearby, and also possibly the remains of the bridge across the River Nore, which arguably were the two major economic *raison d'être* for the nucleated settlement at Newtown Jerpoint in the Middle Ages.

In 1375 the Provost and Commons of Newtown Jerpoint were given a grant of pontage for ten years by King Edward III so that they could levy certain tolls and customs on all saleable items that crossed their bridge (*Rot. pat. Hib.* 1828, 91, no. 52). This grant ensured the prosperity of the citizens of Newtown Jerpoint until the end of the Middle Ages when other towns nearby, like Thomastown with its competing bridge across the River Nore climbed into ascendancy as Jerpoint declined. Other structures of economic importance to the town included the mill, which I have argued before, could have been located beneath the later flour mill which is on the eastern side of the Little Arrigle River (Barry 1994, 80). If it were located on this

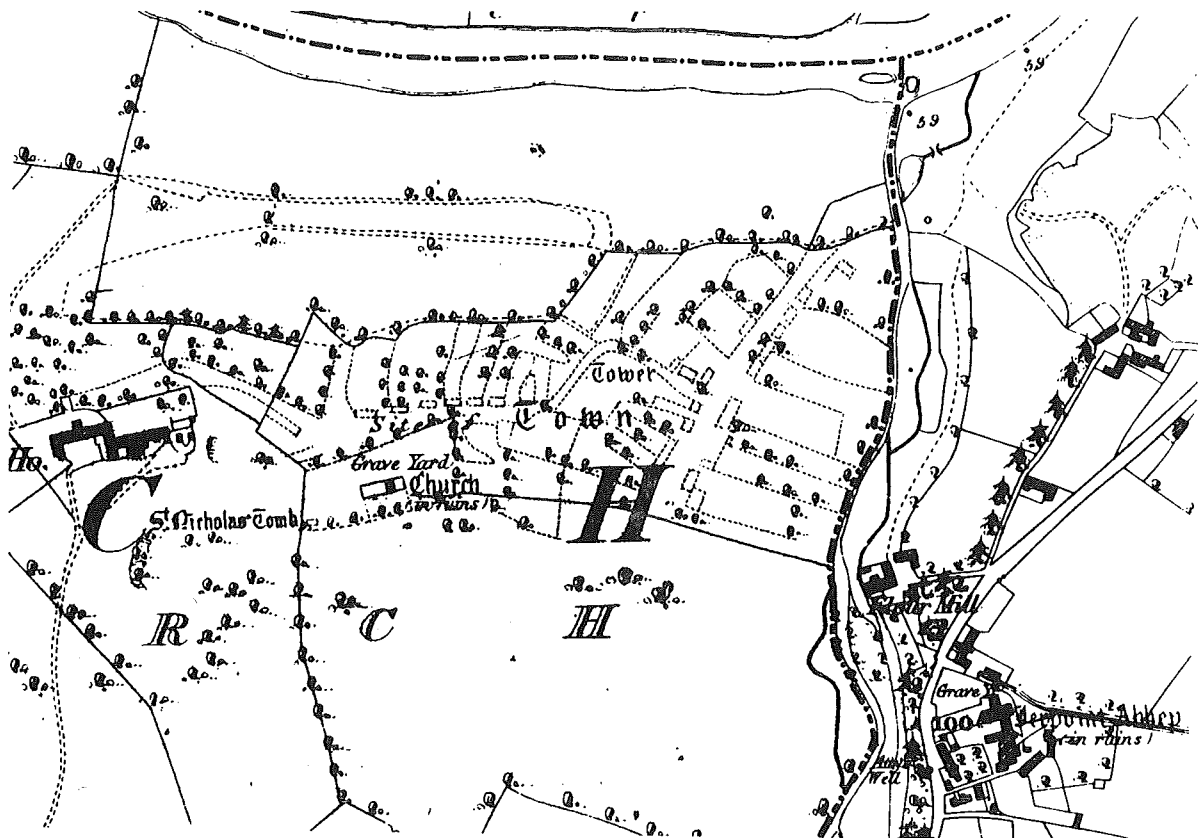


Fig. 1. The deserted medieval settlement of Newtown Jerpoint, County Kilkenny, as shown on the first edition of the Ordnance Survey 6-inch map (1839).

side of the river it probably also functioned as the mill for the Cistercian abbey of Jerpoint, located just to its south. However, more recently, Bradley has suggested that there is evidence that the medieval mill mentioned in the later thirteenth century extent was probably located on the town side of the river, a more logical location for it from the point of view of the town's inhabitants (*J. Bradley*, Department of Modern History, National University of Ireland, Maynooth: *personal comment*, 1997). If there were an earlier mill beneath the later nineteenth century flour mill it may have been owned by Jerpoint Abbey. The rental for the nucleated settlement's mill is low at £2.12s.4d in 1289, if we compare it with the rental of other mills of roughly the same period in S.E. Ireland (*PRO S.C.* 11 794). In comparison, the settlement of Ardmayle in Co. Tipperary was paying over £16 per annum, and even a small manor such as Ballyherk in the same county was paying £4 rental in 1305 (*RBO* 1932, 64, 51). Both Jerpoint mills were probably water-driven given their location beside the Little Arrigle River, probably the most common type of mill in medieval Ireland. However, only occasionally is there a specific reference to a "water mill" such as we find in the *Red Book of Ormond* for Moyaliff in Co. Tipperary at the beginning of the fourteenth century, again with a higher rental than the example at Newtown Jerpoint, at £5.13.4d (*RBO* 1932, 65). The only other piece of information that we can glean from the extent for Newtown Jerpoint is that the miller's name was "Wyn", which probably reflected his Welsh ancestry. In 1635 the ruined remains of this mill are mentioned in a surviving document, and from the description we know that it was timber-built as it stated that the forests of Old Jerpoint "which since the first building of the said mill... did furnish it with all necessary timber" [*NLI MS* 11 053 (12)].

The 1289 Extent also mentioned the existence of small brewery in the village, the tax on which was worth 3s per annum, another important economic feature of the settlement (*PRO S.C.* 11 794). Indeed local tradition suggested that Newtown Jerpoint in its heyday had 14 wine taverns, something of an exaggeration I think, but nevertheless a good story! The survival of the base of a possible market cross into this century is also a reminder that there was a thriving agricultural market there, in which produce and goods from the abbey were probably bought and sold, as well as other commodities from the surrounding area. Indeed, the size of the hinterland that served such a settlement is a research question which would well repay further study.

The town's important economic relationship with Jerpoint Cistercian abbey also needs further study and investigation, especially as it seems to have started to go into decline very soon after the abbey was dissolved in the sixteenth century. Indeed many of the craftsmen whom the abbey required for its building work and everyday maintenance probably lived in the town. Without the abbey and its custom many of the surviving craftspeople arguably left for the nearby towns of Thomastown and Gowran. Indeed, Thomastown was walled as early as 1216 (*C.D.I.* 1 1875, no. 732) and its burghage rental was almost ten times bigger than that of Newtown Jerpoint. Thus with its walls and with a much larger population size it could better weather the vicissitudes of the fourteenth century and beyond, something that the smaller and less well protected Newtown Jerpoint could not do as well. Its more secure bridging point across the River Nore and its harbour facilities were obviously also important factors in its survival during the later Middle Ages as the unwalled Newtown Jerpoint went into decline. Maybe some of the trade from Jerpoint Abbey itself was also being captured by Thomastown as it was located only some 2 km away from the abbey.

In the 1970's Foley excavated a site at Jerpointchurch (*Fig. 2*) not far from Newtown Jerpoint where two buildings were found, one above the other, on an artificial platform to keep them above the flood level of the nearby Arrigle river (*Foley* 1989). The earlier structure was mud-walled with low stone footings, and interestingly enough contained more in the way of finds than the second, more substantial stone building. There was also a timbered lean-to structure put up on the northern side of the house. It was probably a peasant long-house as its finds and plan were very similar to that of House 1 at Caherguillamore, Lough Gur, County Limerick, excavated by O Ríordáin and Hunt in the 1940's (*Ó Ríordáin - Hunt* 1942, 62). The second more substantial building over 10 m long and 5 m wide, built of mortared stone and with two storeys, might have functioned as the manor house of the nearby settlement. There has also been the suggestion that because of the general paucity of finds associated with this second stone building that this may have been the barn of the settlement but I am inclined to believe that it was either a grange or manor house because although the finds were limited they were, nevertheless, of good quality. These included two sherds of Spanish Merida ware and another sherd from Chester in England as well as a tailor's pin (*Foley* 1989, 89-90). However, even if it did turn out to have been a barn this would also be significant in emphasising the importance of grain production to the community that lived in Newtown Jerpoint during the Middle Ages.

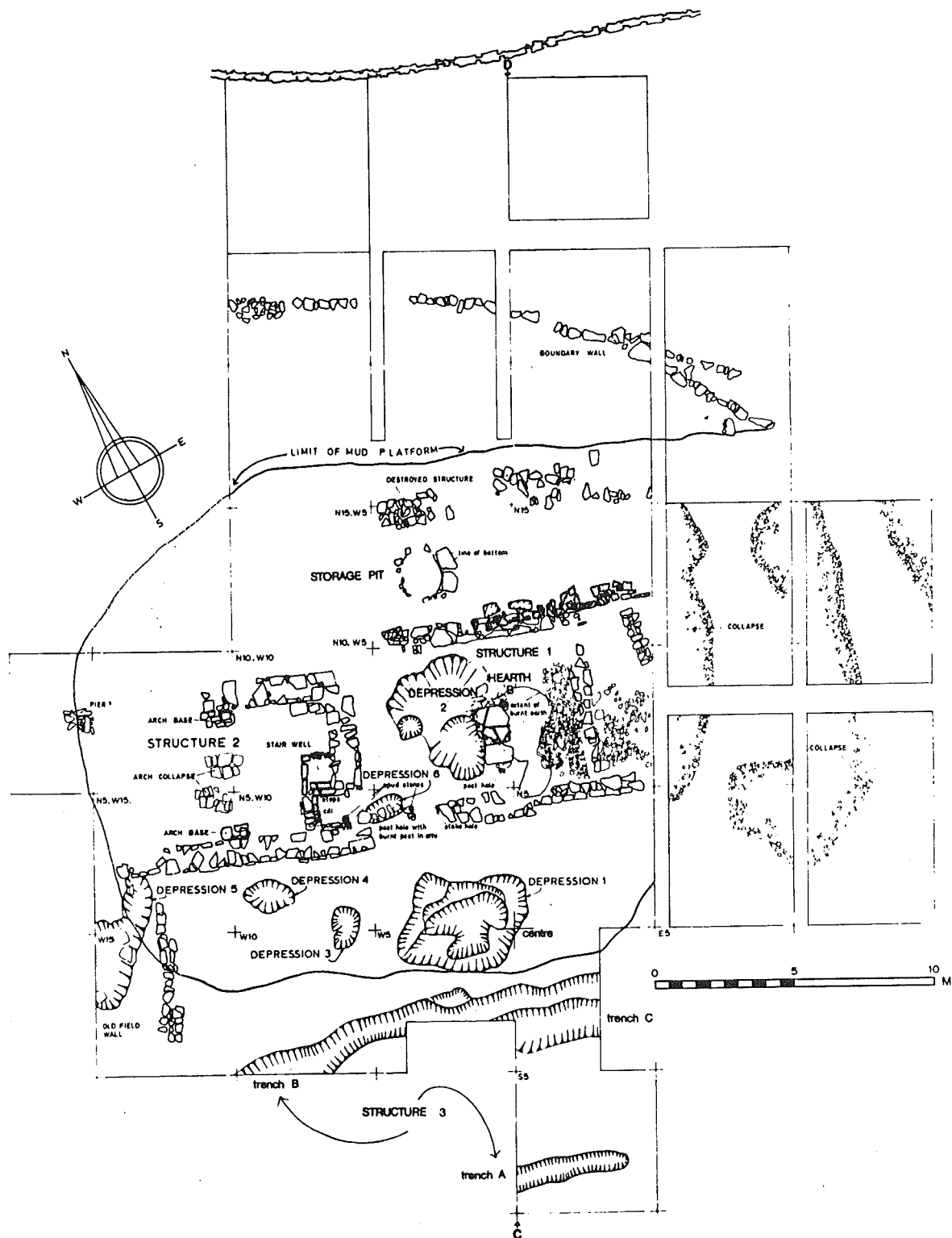


Fig. 2. General site plan of the medieval settlement at Jerpointchurch, County Kilkenny (after Foley 1989).

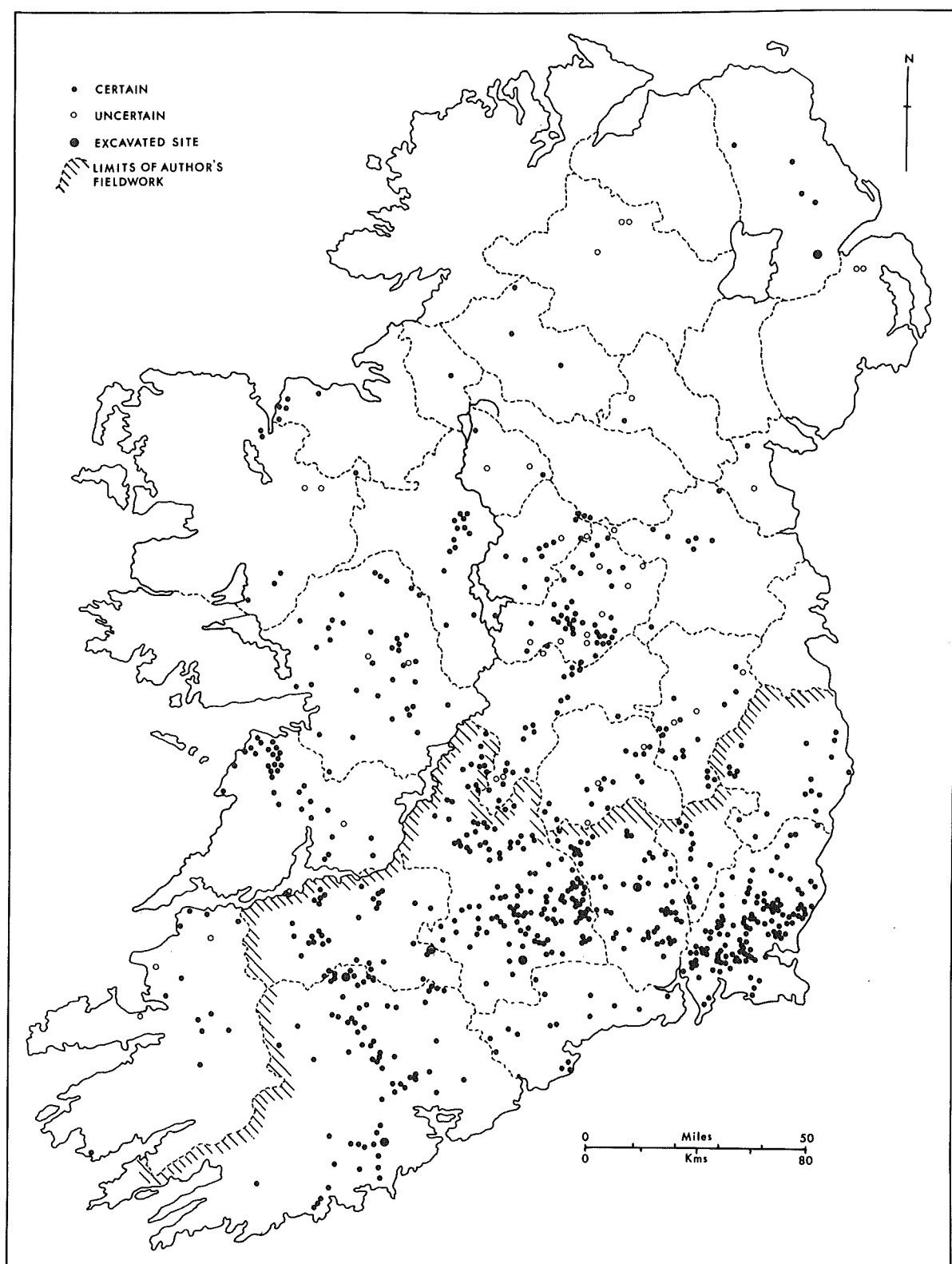


Fig. 3. Distribution map of probable medieval moated sites: Counties Cork and Kerry are the two most southerly counties (distribution of moated sites outside the study area is that mapped by *Glasscock 1970*).

Dispersed settlements

One of major classes of dispersed settlements in Ireland in the Middle Ages was the moated site, of which there are at least 750 examples still extant on the Irish landscape. As can be seen from their distribution they are concentrated on the peripheries of the Anglo-Norman lordship, especially in the southern counties of Cork and Limerick (*Fig. 3*). It is thought that these moated sites were often the farms of the lesser Anglo-Norman aristocracy and, according to O'Connor, possibly of the free tenantry as well (*K. O'Connor, Discovery Programme, personal comment, 1997*). These peripherally-located settlements were often Anglo-Norman out-farms as is well illustrated in the now-famous manorial account roll documents that survive for the Lordship of Carlow from the end of the thirteenth century (*PRO S.C. 1237-9*). The information in these inform us of the importance of the protection afforded by the moat and banks in such an isolated location on the edge of great Anglo-Norman manorial estate of the powerful Bigod family in County Wexford. Very few account rolls survive in Ireland for the Middle Ages, unlike the situation in England, and when they do they are of the utmost importance to the scholar of the Irish medieval rural landscape. This series of account rolls show that the manor of Old Ross, the largest in the Liberty of Carlow, was essentially a centre for the rearing of stock, primarily sheep, although there is also mounting evidence that grain production was also growing rapidly during the 1280's.

By the early fourteenth century the manorial caput at Old Ross was in decline, probably as a direct result of the increasing prosperity of New Ross situated some 6.5 km to its west on the banks of the River Nore. As the prosperity of New Ross increased the fortunes of the original borough at Old Ross went into even steeper decline so that by the end of the fourteenth century it was all but deserted as a nucleated settlement. But at the end of the previous century the two out-farms or granges of Kilcolman and Ballyconnor had been established, and land clearance and cultivation was in progress. At Ballyconnor we know from the accounts that its farm was surrounded by a moat, and it has recently been identified as the still surviving moated site at Mylerspark (*Fig. 4*) in south County Wexford (*Colfer 1996*). The accounts for the years 1282-4 include a by now famously unique detailed description of its construction. They reveal that around 15 % of the income of the whole manor for the two years was taken up with the construction of this moated site. There was quite a workforce involved, with up to 18 carpenters and their assistants listed in the accounts. One of them, Thomas, was called "the Ditcher" because his particular skill lay in the digging out of the moat that surrounded the site. We are also lucky enough to learn some extremely interesting details about what went on, economically speaking, within the moat itself as eight of the total stock of 36 oxen on the manor were to be kept within the safe confines of the moated site at Ballyconnor after two oxen were recorded as having been "stolen by robbers" in 1283-4. References such as these also reveal the importance of stock rearing, apart from sheep, to the manorial economy of South-East Ireland in this period. Another useful piece of socio-economic information relates to the existence of a smith on the site as there is an entry for the payment of 71s and also 4d for the production of two locks. A smith would have been a necessity on any manorial out-farm with farm implements, farming vehicles and horses all probably requiring the services regularly throughout the year.

Despite the long tradition of metal-working in Ireland dating back to the early medieval period, with the production of such important artefacts as the Tara Brooch or the Ardagh or Derrynaflan chalices, very little research has been done on the smithy or forges that were probably to be found dotted all over Anglo-Norman Ireland. Occasionally, however, archaeological excavations of medieval rural sites do produce evidence of metal-working, such as the ironworking complex located by Cleary in the 1980's close to the remains of two thirteenth to early fourteenth century houses at Bouchier's Castle in County Limerick (*Barry 1994, 109*).

When we turn to examining the lands around the moated site at Ballyconnor we can see that in the three years, 1280-1, 1284 and 1285 large amounts of sand were purchased to spread on the newly-won lands on the manor. In all over 18 acres of land seemed to have been sanded in this period, and over 48 acres of land cleared, as well. Animal manure was also used extensively to fertilise the lands. It would seem that the main crops were oats which were sown over much of the 240 acres of arable land in the out-farm. In all the rent for this out-farm represented something in the order of 12 % of the total manorial rent roll, and it functioned as a viable economic unit with both arable and livestock farming as its main economic activity within the larger manor of Old Ross. Indeed it seems to have functioned in a similar way to those out-farms in the Forest of Arden district in Warwickshire in the English Midlands that Brian Roberts made a classic study of in the 1960's (*Roberts 1965*). These English moated sites were also located in assarted land in dense woodland, much like the probable surroundings of the Ballyconnor site, and were set up in the newly colonised "waste-land" of the forest somewhere between 1150 and 1350.

For Gaelic Irish rural settlement in this period it is really only the high status sites such as Clonroad More near Ennis in County Clare that have left any appreciable archaeological trace on the landscape (*Hunt 1946*). But there is a real difficulty in locating any substantial archaeological evidence for the lesser status sites of the Gaelic Irish. There is still a debate about the survival of the ringfort into the High Middle Ages, and the latest book on the subject, by Matthew Stout, tends to play down this possibility (*Stout 1996*). There is, however, little doubt that some of them were still being occupied throughout the Middle Ages, even if they were not being built then. Apart from these essentially dispersed settlements there were also transient nucleated settlements which, by their very nature, have left little archaeological trace of their former existence. However, new geophysical and remote sensing methods of survey may very well be able to locate such sites in the future, especially if documentary sources indicate that they might be in a particular locality.

The finds from the Gaelic Irish "palace" site of Clonroad More near Ennis in Co. Clare, which was occupied from the start of the thirteenth century until it was destroyed by Dermot MacDonough MacBrian Rua in 1311 were as spectacular and exotic as any of those found at comparable Anglo-Norman sites. Because of the limited nature of the excavation by Hunt in the 1940's, which was in advance of sewerage works near the River Fergus, no traces of any substantial buildings of the period were located, apart from a drain. As well as finding many sherds of polychrome ware jugs from Ham Green in Bristol and Saintonge in Western France, the excavator located the spout of a bronze vessel, probably made in Flanders, which dated to the early fourteenth century. I can do no better than to quote Hunt on it: "The Dinaderie spout comes from a vessel, perhaps a puisette or spouted can such as were turned out in Dinant and other towns in Flanders and the Meuse district and these too, were not available to any but the well-to-do" (*Hunt 1946*, 208). Both the quality and

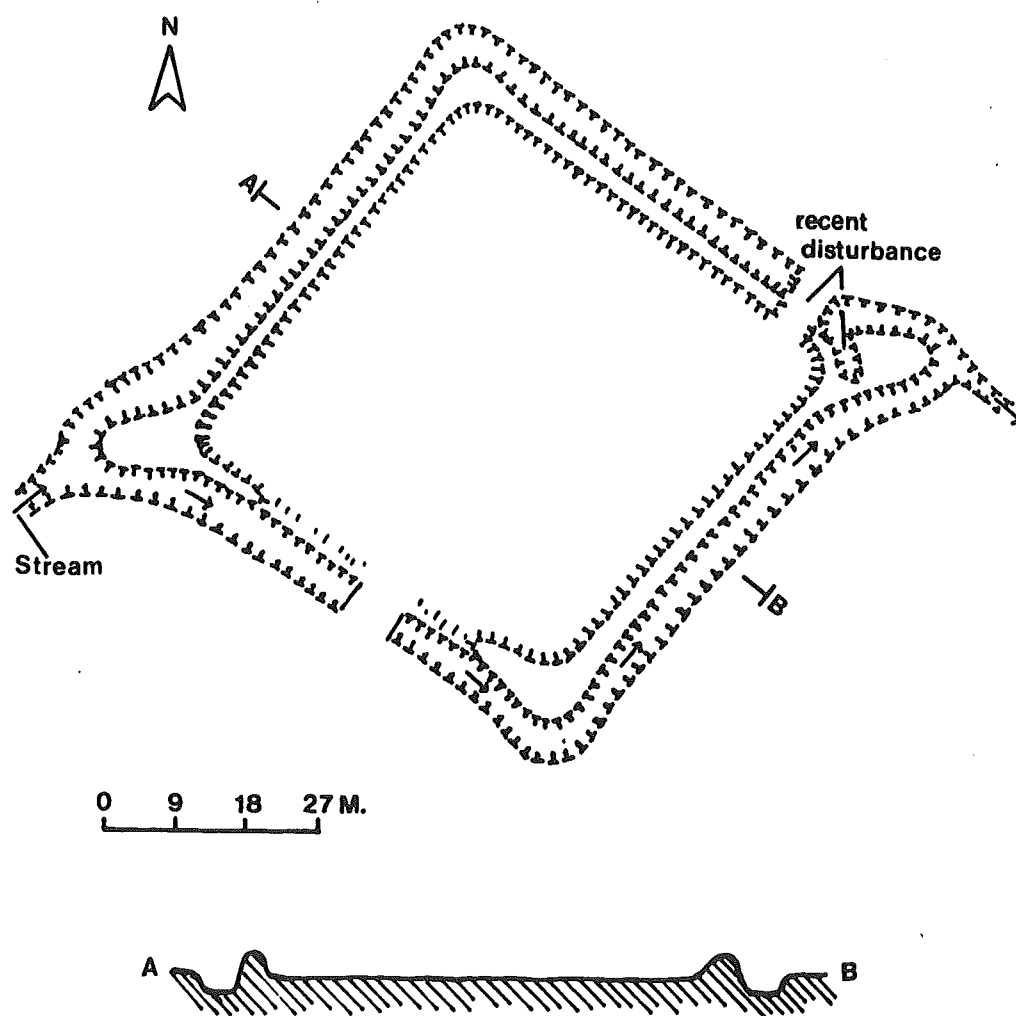


Fig. 4. Plan of the moated site at Mylerspark, County Wexford (after Colfer 1996).

the wide geographical spread of these fragments of tableware are all a testament to the extensive trading network of the Gaelic Irish aristocracy of the period. Interestingly enough, 90 % of the animal bone was that of oxen, and 42 human skull fragments, 30 from one skull, were also found, which may just have come from the burning of the palace in 1311 (*Hunt 1946, 209*). This important site may well repay re-excavation because of the limited nature of the original excavation during the austerities experienced by neutral Ireland during the Second World War.

Conclusions

In conclusion, it is apparent that in Ireland we are still at the stage of identifying settlement types in the landscape so that there is some way to go before we can have an adequate picture of the socio-economic foundations of medieval rural settlement. In regard to the Anglo-Norman rural sites it would be true to say that there has been plenty of field survey of them in the past, but this now needs to be followed up by a properly targeted programme of research excavations on a whole range of both nucleated and dispersed sites. One such site is obviously Newtown Jerpoint in County Kilkenny. Another site would be the moated site at Mylerspark in County Wexford as we have so much detailed information from the surviving contemporary sources on its chronology and its function, as well as its socio-economic importance to the manor of Old Ross. Of course a word of caution needs to be introduced here as was well illustrated by Rahtz's excavation of the Royal hunting lodge at Writtle in Essex in England in the late 1960's (*Rahtz 1969*). This moated site was extremely well documented because of its royal association but when Rahtz came to excavate it he found, much to his surprise, that the archaeological evidence did not always correspond with the historical sources. This may very well be the problem with Mylerspark, especially as we are not one hundred per cent sure that it is the site of Ballyconnor.

I hope this paper has indicated how much still remains to be researched if we are to understand Ireland's medieval rural landscape and its socio-economic framework adequately. Hopefully, when Ruralia III meets in Ireland in 1999 the Discovery Programme's medieval rural settlement research programme will be up and running, and we in the Company will look forward to showing you some of the results of our research. It therefore promises to be a very exciting and fruitful time for research into medieval rural settlement in Ireland as we move into the next millennium.

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LES ÉLÉMENTS SOCIO-ÉCONOMIQUES DES HABITATIONS IRLANDAISES RURALES AU COURS DU MOYEN ÂGE

Ce document donne une analyse de la base socio-économique de l'établissement Irlandais rural à la fois Anglo-Norman et Gaelic Irish pendant le Moyen Âge. Il examine les hiérarchies sociales qui sont trouvées dans les petites villes des Anglo-Normans comme Newtown Jerpoint en County Kilkenny et il essaie aussi de reconnaître les sections de la société qui ont choisi de vivre dans les établissements dispersés.

On discute l'importance relative des affaires rurales et l'industrie dans des établissements médiévaux comme le moulin et la forge. Il termine avec une évaluation du montant riche des informations qui existent dans des documents survivants seigneuriaux de l'époque et avec une proposition suggérée pour les recherches archéologiques au futur.

SOZIOÖKONOMISCHE ASPEKTE MITTELALTERLICHER SIEDLUNGEN IN IRLAND

Der Vortrag untersucht die sozioökonomische Basis von sowohl anglo-normannischen als auch gälisch-irischen ländlichen Siedlungen im mittelalterlichen Irland. Dabei werden zunächst die sozialen Hierarchien analysiert, die sich einerseits in dichten Siedlungen der Anglo-Normannen finden, wie zum Beispiel Newtown Jerpoint in der Grafschaft Kilkenny; andererseits wird auch auf solche gesellschaftlichen Gruppierungen eingegangen, deren Siedlungen verstreuter angelegt sind.

Im Anschluss daran wird der Einfluss die Bedeutung ländlichen Handels und der Industrie in mittelalterlichen Siedlungen dargestellt (zum Beispiel durch Mühle und Schmiede). Es folgt ein Überblick über die vielfältigen Informationen, die durch manoriale Dokumente dieser Periode auch heute noch zugänglich sind, um schliesslich Vorschläge für zukünftige archäologische Forschungsprojekte in diesem Feld zu machen.

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