

RURAL SETTLEMENT IN IRELAND IN THE MIDDLE AGES: AN OVERVIEW

Terry BARRY

Ireland's pattern of rural settlement in the Middle Ages is very different from that of her nearest neighbour, Britain because the main impetus behind nucleation there, the Roman conquest and settlement, never impacted upon us. Even as late as the tenth century, apart from the major monasteries such as Glendalough in County Wicklow or Clonmacnoise, County Offaly, and the large Hiberno-Norse ports such as Dublin, Waterford, Wexford, and Cork mainly concentrated along the east coast, there is no certain evidence for large numbers of nucleated settlements (Barry 1994, 28-36). There may also have been some hillforts and promontory forts of the prehistoric past still being occupied in this period, but this would have been a limited number of sites. Two examples of this are the hilltop enclosure of Rathgall, Co. Wicklow, where Raftery found some sherds of medieval pottery which has since been interpreted as indicating Gaelic Irish re-occupation of the site (Long 1994, 259), and Dunbeg promontory fort on the Dingle Peninsula, Co. Kerry, excavated by the present author in 1977, where a dry-stone beehive hut of the tenth or eleventh century was occupied in its interior (Barry 1981, 312-317). The known archaeological evidence underlines the importance of dispersed settlements, even in the low-lying richer agricultural land in the eastern half of the island. These are the ring-forts or *raths*, circular earthen enclosures, on average c. 30 m in diameter, which are now marked by a low bank and a dry external ditch. In the west they are mostly constructed of dry-stone and are called *cashels*. Excavations have shown that they were often the defended farmsteads of the free element in early Irish society, dating to the first millennium AD but with a concentration in the second half of the period. All together it has been estimated that between 30,000 and 40,000 of these settlements survived into the nineteenth century to be mapped by the Ordnance Survey (Hamlin 1983, 21).

A variant of the ring-fort is the *crannóg* or habitation site on an island in a lake, of which up to 1,000 examples are thought to have existed. This is a very distinctive early medieval settlement form, especially in the period after 500 AD. They may have had an origin as early as the Neolithic period but the earliest secure archaeological dating evidence would put this no earlier than the later Bronze Age (O'Kelly 1989). There is a significant *crannóg* excavation currently taking place at Moynagh Lough in County Meath, directed by Bradley, where many important artefacts have been discovered which relate to iron smelting and other industrial activities in the early medieval period (Bradley 1995). This excavation has revealed the long, complex and wealthy settlement history that might very well be found in other *crannógs*.

There has been much scholarly discussion recently on the very limited historical sources that suggest there were also some nucleated settlements found in association with the ring-forts. We know from the cartographic evidence that these farm clusters with their associated outbuildings which possessed no formal plan existed from the seventeenth century onwards. All attempts to conclusively prove that these 'clachans', as they were named by the historical geographer Estyn Evans, had their origins in the early medieval period have proved largely fruitless to date. Some examples of these farm clusters still survive in remote localities such as in the north-west, like Lenankeel in County Donegal, and rather more surprisingly perhaps in the south-east, in south County Kilkenny and in County Wexford (Burtchaell 1988, 111-115). Sometimes the early field systems of deserted examples, farmed using the 'rundale' system of agriculture, can be identified from the air (Barry 1994, 24).

It is only following the Anglo-Norman invasion in 1169-70 that there was widespread nucleation in the eastern half of the country. During the early part of the thirteenth century the Anglo-Normans founded cities, towns, villages and hamlets throughout that part of Ireland that was under their control. Graham has estimated that there are more than 330 examples of places that were granted borough or market status in this

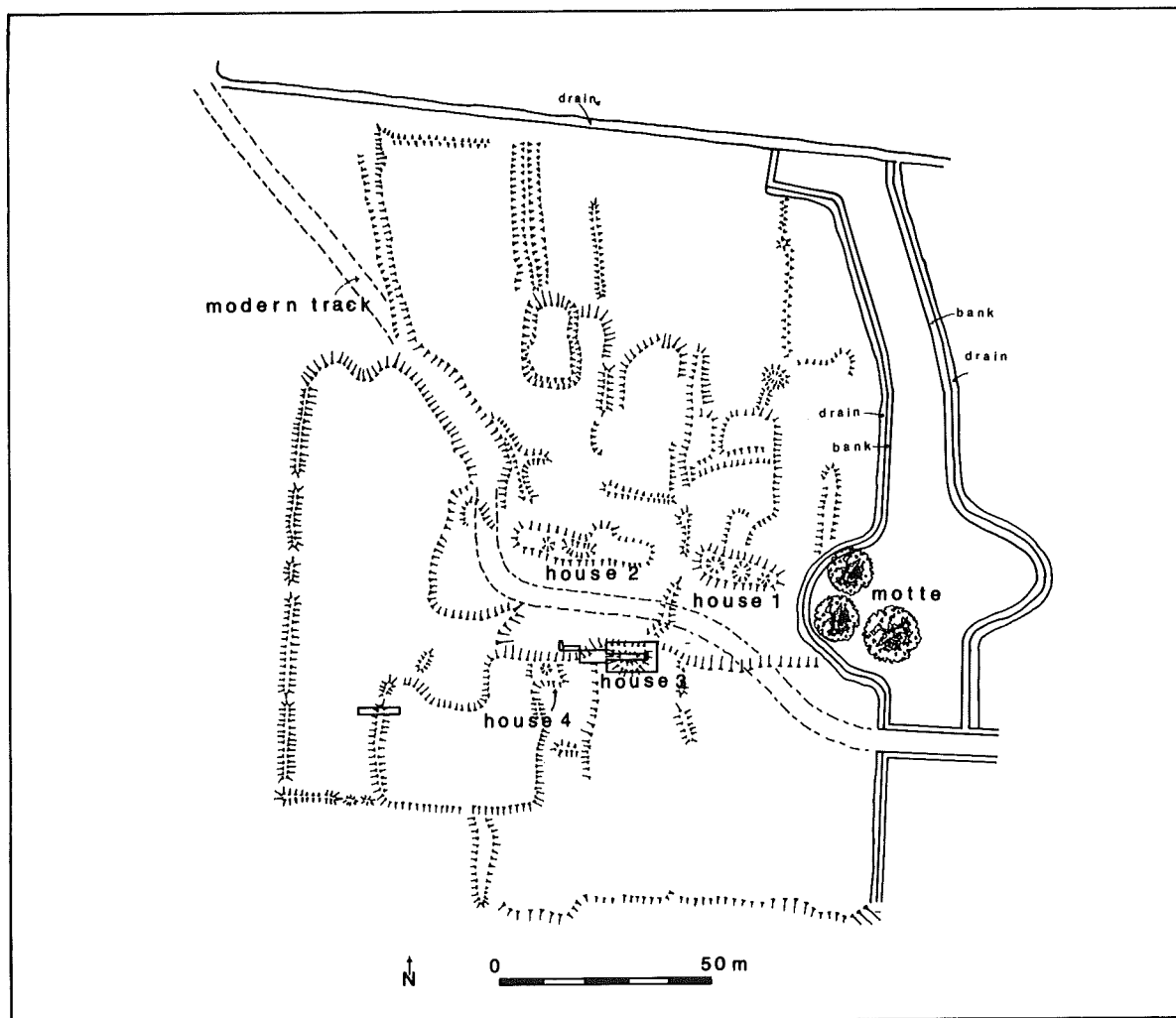


Fig. 1. General plan of Piperstown deserted medieval village, County Louth, showing the two excavated areas of 1987.

period. There must also have been many smaller settlements that have still to be located, as they did not feature in the surviving documents of the period (Graham 1993, 82-3). Over the last twenty years there has been a growing interest and debate upon the major forms of both dispersed and nucleated settlement in Anglo-Norman Ireland (Barry 1994). In the Anglo-Norman Lordship there developed a hierarchy of true towns as well as many small boroughs which were no larger than the medieval villages of lowland Britain, but whose inhabitants were given all the rights of burgesses. This was granted either by the Crown or the greater Anglo-Norman lords in order to attract settlers from a densely populated Britain to the new colony in Ireland. This burghage tenure, as it was called, included the fixed annual rental of one shilling or less, and the right to tax, judge and govern themselves outside the often repressive feudal regime that existed in the rest of the Lordship. These freedoms were much sought after, and so it is scarcely surprising that so many 'rural boroughs' were set up in Ireland in the expansionary thirteenth century (Glasscock 1970). Nevertheless, especially in more remote hills, bogland or forested areas within the Anglo-Norman Lordship there were probably many dispersed settlements.

Even within the heartland of this Lordship, in County Dublin, only some 19 km to the west of the capital, scholars such as Simms have employed phosphate analysis of areas close to the village of Newcastle Lyons to identify several possible dispersed settlements ringing this 'manorial centre'. Her interesting hypothesis is that many of these nucleated settlements with borough status in Ireland only comprised a castle or manor complex and a church, with the majority of the population living some distance from this centre in these dispersed locations. Indeed, she further argued that Ireland's townland (the smallest administrative area) system militated against the creation of large villages in the Lordship, and that the major free tenants held land independently in their own townlands (Edwards - Hamond - Simms 1983). If this were found to be

the case elsewhere within the Anglo-Norman colony it would make us rethink the true extent of nucleated settlements within its confines. It would also mean that the pattern of settlement there would arguably have been more similar to that which existed in the areas that still remained under Gaelic Irish control.

However, whatever the outcome of this interesting research it is still true to argue that the great majority of medieval villages in the eastern half of Ireland were set up using the classic English lowland model. One such example was Piperstown, the only known deserted medieval village in County Louth (*Fig. 1*) which was identified by the Archaeological Survey of Ireland in 1974 (*Buckley - Sweetman 1991, 300*). It was difficult to initially identify it as a possible deserted medieval village as there was neither a church nor even a cemetery to be seen within the precincts of the village earthworks. It was also extremely difficult to identify the degraded remains of a small motte to the immediate east of the village site as it was partially obscured by a later plantation of trees.

The archaeological excavation by the author in 1987 concentrated upon one identifiable house platform (House 3 in *Fig. 1*) and one external rectilinear earthen bank on the western edge of the village. No larger area could have been excavated in that season given the small size of the excavation budget, and there is little doubt that a further larger scale excavation may elucidate much more information on the origins, development and decline of this village. Indeed most of our evidence for rural settlement in this period has come either from the close study of the surviving medieval manorial documents or from extensive fieldwork as there has been very few archaeological excavations on these important sites, a lack which must be urgently remedied. Archaeologically the house platforms and rectilinear banks were some of the most obvious surface features among all the village earthworks of Piperstown. This excavation was a valuable addition to the limited excavation evidence which to date has been largely concentrated in the south and west of the island.

Like so many medieval earthwork sites in Ireland it has only been identified as the result of archaeological field survey because there is only some limited references to it in the surviving medieval documents. There is an interesting entry as early as 1316 of the destruction by the Irish of 14 cottages at 'Pippardeston', which then goes on to state that 'the whole country is destroyed by the Scots' (*C.I.P.M. 1908*). This is an obvious reference to the Bruce invasion of Ireland which began in May 1315 and continued until the death of Edward Bruce at the Battle of Faughart in October 1318 (*Frame 1974-5*). In 1343 the nearby church of St. Mary at 'Drumsalan' was first mentioned. This appears to have been a 'cell' for three canons of the priory of

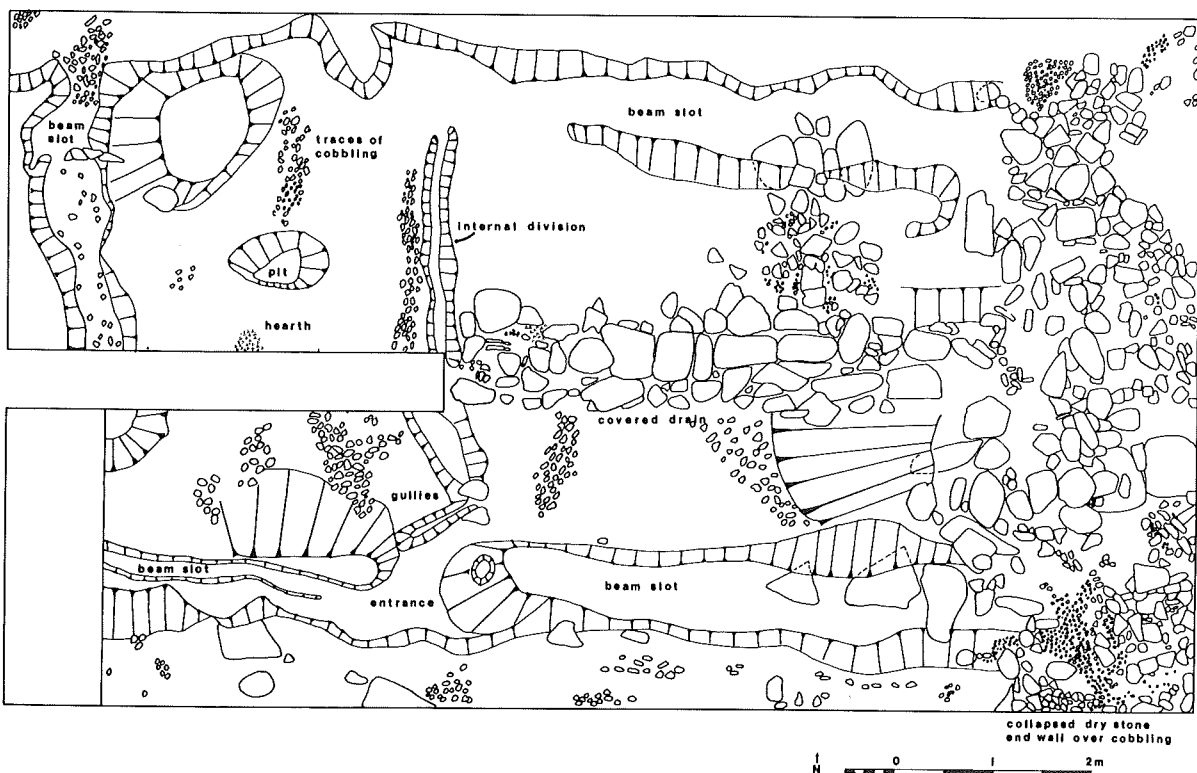


Fig. 2. Excavated plan of House 3 at Piperstown, County Louth.

Holy Trinity in Dublin, which was granted to it as early as 1202 by King John (*McNeill 1950, 204*). It is this church which could arguably have acted as the parish church as it is situated less than a kilometre from the south-western boundary of the village, particularly as no church has yet been identified within the confines of its earthworks.

The excavation revealed that the village was in existence in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries as 23 sherds of medieval jugs, 5 sherds of medieval cooking pots, and one portion of a medieval roof tile were found associated with the occupation layers on the house platform. A thirteenth century hunting arrow was also located there as well as a small number of other metal artefacts of probable medieval date. However, the great majority of the more than 400 artefacts recovered by excavation, most of which were pottery sherds, were post-medieval in date and indicated that the village was probably abandoned sometime early in the eighteenth century, some years before the present Piperstown House was built over 100 m to its east. This late desertion date reinforces the picture that is slowly emerging from other excavations and from the documentary sources that the main period of desertion in Ireland was in the post-medieval period, rather than the later Middle Ages as was the case in the English midlands (*Smyth 1985; Beresford - Hurst 1971*). Indeed, the probability that the village was thriving in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries has been given added weight by the finding of seven coins (two which were unidentifiable) somewhere in the vicinity of the village a few months after the excavation was concluded (personal communication from the National Museum of Ireland). The identifiable coins, struck in the reigns of Queen Elizabeth I (1558-1603) and King William III (1689-1702), were found in association with a small lead seal of the family of Montgomerie of Eglinton in Scotland of about the same period.

The only identifiable structure located during the excavation was the very simple medieval house, whose external dimensions were 8 m in length by 5.6 m wide. It was orientated in an east-west direction, with probable beam slots remaining of its two long sides. There were the faint traces of a hearth at its western end and an entrance, 1.3 m wide, on its southern side. There was also a dry-stone flagged drain, 1.25 m wide, running for some 8 m through the centre of the eastern end of the house in an east-west direction out under the eastern gable wall, which also seemed to have been built of dry stone. As in many comparable medieval long houses in Ireland and elsewhere in Europe, livestock were kept in one end of the building. The western end or living area was separated from the animals in the eastern half of the house by an internal partition, the base of which can still be discerned some 3.55 m from the western gable wall. No trace of any roof was located during the excavation apart from the one roof tile, which would suggest that it was constructed of perishable material such as thatch or turf sods (*Evans 1957, 39-58*).

It is becoming clearer that although the Anglo-Normans did set up a hierarchy of nucleated settlements throughout their Lordship, as is evidenced by the large numbers of both surviving and deserted towns and villages that owe their origins to these colonisers, that there was undoubtedly a higher level of dispersed settlements than in lowland England, for example. In this context there is a significant difference between the two countries over the distribution pattern of moated sites, those rectangular earthworks delineated by a bank and wet moat, which mainly functioned as the defended manor houses and farms of the minor Anglo-Norman nobility in the thirteenth and early fourteenth century. Archaeological evidence has revealed that the period of occupation of most of these moated sites was very concentrated, usually from the thirteenth to the first half of the fourteenth century (*Barry 1994, 87-93*). By this latter period the borders of the Lordship were generally so unsafe for the Anglo-Irish colonists that even these defensive settlement forms were being abandoned at an increasing rate. It is probable that their inhabitants either moved into the nearest secure nucleated settlement or into stone tower houses, which were to become such a common feature of the later medieval landscape (see below pp. 139-140).

In southern England moated sites are often found located within a village, while in Ireland they are concentrated on the periphery of the Lordship, where the colonists felt most under threat from the Gaelic Irish, as is seen in their distribution pattern (*Fig. 3*). The majority were located more than 3.4 km away from the nearest known nucleated settlement, and a significant minority of them were even located in uplands where their inhabitants felt safer from any threat. In the two counties of Kilkenny and Tipperary alone 20 sites have been located at altitudes in excess of 200 m OD (*Barry 1977, 113-15*). At Castlewarren, County Kilkenny, the large moated site, 2,330 sq m in area, is to be found on a slight western slope in the hills to the north-east of Kilkenny City at 247 m above sea level (*Barry 1977, 94*). There is another smaller moated site at Glengar in County Tipperary which is situated at an even higher altitude at 340 m OD, on a south-east facing slope of the Gortnageragh Hills (*Barry 1977, 201*). From its platform Tipperary town can easily be observed, as well as the Glen of Aherlow 21 km to the south. Obviously the defensive requirements of the Anglo-Norman colonists in Ireland were of greater significance than they were to their contemporaries in the much more settled conditions that prevailed in lowland England throughout the middle ages.

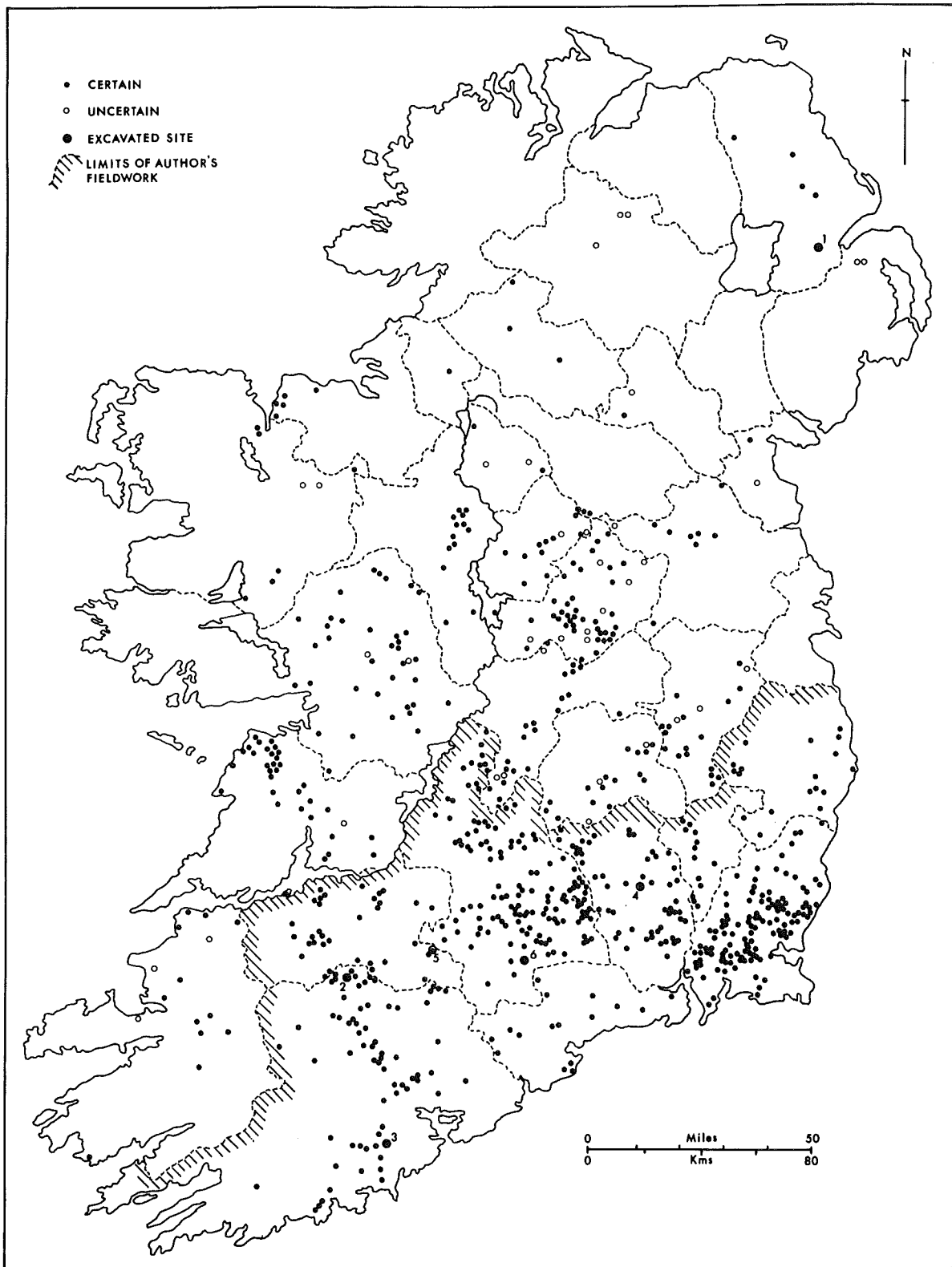


Fig. 3. Distribution map of moated sites in Ireland based on cartographic and fieldwork evidence. The numbers identify the six sites that have been archaeologically excavated.

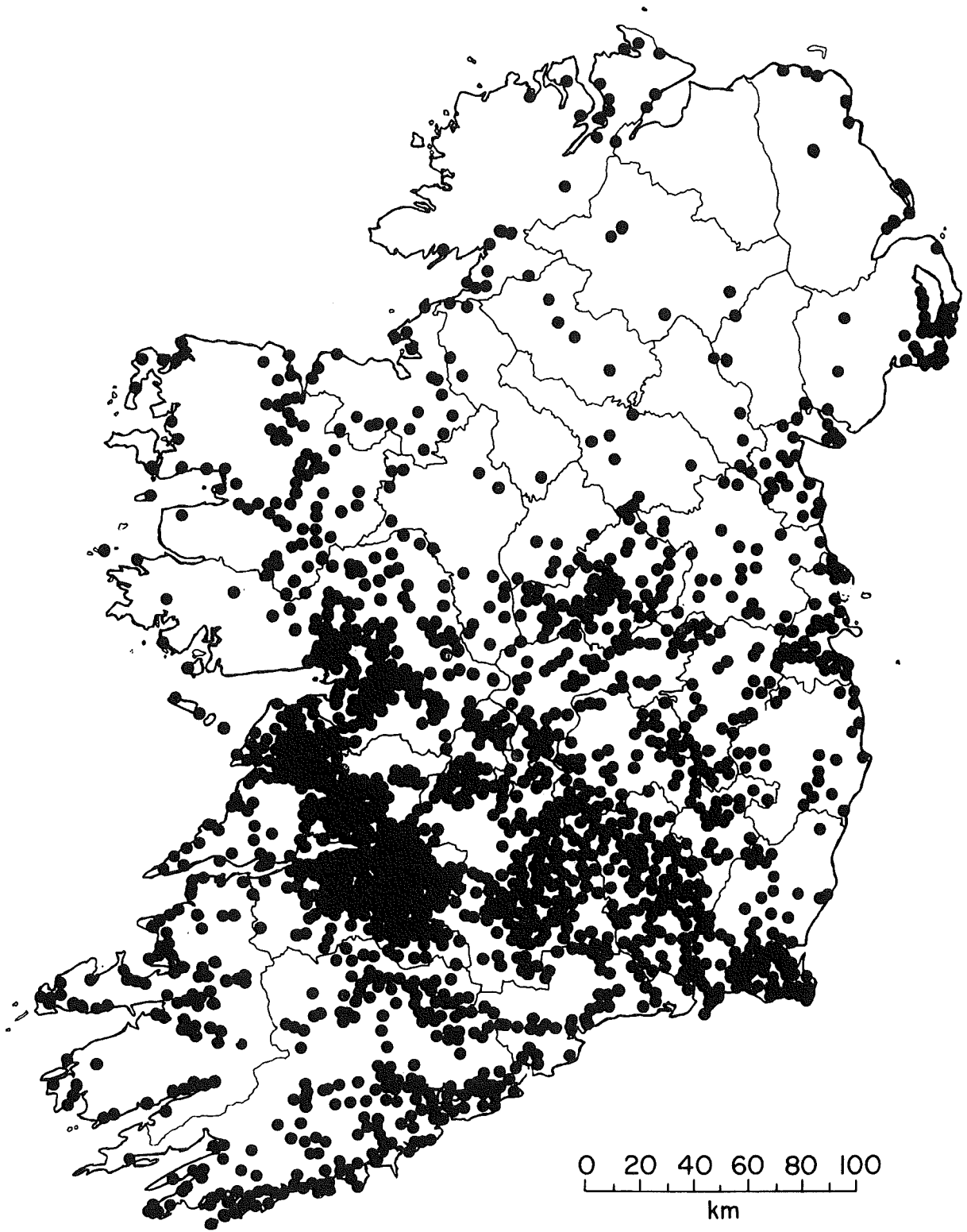


Fig. 4. Distribution map of Irish tower houses.

Although moated sites were not built in large numbers in Gaelic Irish areas there is a growing body of evidence to show that the Gaelic Irish equivalent to them, the *rath* or ring fort, was still being occupied at this late period. Apart from the seventeenth century cartographic evidence showing two buildings within the interior of the ringfort at Tullahogue, County Tyrone, Rynne has produced archaeological evidence of the medieval and later utilisation of two ring-forts at Shannon Airport in County Clare (*Hayes-McCoy 1964; Rynne 1963*). There are also at least three more ring-fort excavation sites in Ulster where distinct medieval occupation layers have been located (*Barrett - Graham 1975, 35*). It is also a logical extension of this evidence to argue that some may very well have been constructed during this period. But there is, as yet, no definite archaeological evidence to show that any ring-fort was constructed as late as the twelfth century. This task is made more difficult as many ring-fort excavations have produced little in the way of artefacts or occupation levels that can be securely dated.

The importance of dispersed forms of settlement is also to be seen in the later fourteenth, fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when the Irish landscape was dominated by the tower house which was a single stone tower, nearly always accompanied by a courtyard or bawn which often contained ancillary buildings. These tower houses were a compromise between a castle and an undefended house, with the main living area situated on the top floor. The earliest examples had only narrow slits and openings in keeping with the defensive needs of the time, but later examples often possess wider mullioned windows. In the distribution map they are to be found all over the island, with concentrations in the west and especially in Counties Clare and Limerick (*Fig. 4*). The only region where they seem to be lacking is in the northern half of the country, especially in Ulster although there are local concentrations around Strangford Lough in County Down. Although over 3,000 towers are represented on this map recent research by scholars such as Cairns in County Tipperary has indicated that the nineteenth century cartographic evidence on which this map is based only shows about half of these towers (*Cairns 1987, 3-4*). This would mean that a more accurate overall figure could be closer to 7,000 examples, re-emphasising Ireland's position as the most encastellated country in Europe at the time. What is arguably more significant is that these towers are found concentrated in both Gaelic and Anglo-Irish areas, underlining yet again the importance of dispersed settlement within Ireland as a whole in the later middle ages.

Increasingly it is becoming apparent that the settlement models envisaged for the Anglo-Norman Lordship by Otway-Ruthven and other historians, were too simplistic (*Otway-Ruthven 1965*). Even the richest counties of eastern Ireland were never to be exactly the same, in settlement terms and probably in other aspects as well, as those of lowland England. Many Gaelic Irish lived within the Lordship, as some Anglo-Normans must have done within Gaelic Irish dominated areas. In the end it is arguable that the differences between rural settlements in Gaelic and Anglo-Norman Ireland were not as great as we have hitherto been led to believe. There were differences, but the shared environmental realities of every day life in Ireland also meant that there were many similarities between the rural settlements within Ireland's two major medieval cultural zones.

References

- Barrett, G. F. - Graham, B. J. 1975*: Some Considerations concerning the Dating and Distribution of Ring-forts in Ireland, *Journal of the Ulster Archaeological Society* 38, 33-48.
- Barry, T. B. 1981*: Archaeological excavations at Dunbeg Promontory Fort, County Kerry, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 81C, 295-329.
- *1994*: *The Archaeology of Medieval Ireland*. London.
- Beresford, M. W. - Hurst, J. G. (eds.) 1971*: *Deserted Medieval Villages: Studies*. London.
- Bradley, J. 1995*: Excavations at Moynagh Lough, County Meath, *Riocht Na Midhe* 9, No. 1, 158-169.
- Buckley, V. - Sweetman, P. D. (eds.) 1991*: *Archaeological Survey of County Louth*. Dublin.
- Burtchaell, J. 1988*: The South Kilkenny Farm Villages. In: *Smyth, W. J. - Whelan, K. (eds.): Common Ground, Essays on the Historical Geography of Ireland*. Cork, 110-123.
- C.I.P.M. 1908*: *Calendar of Inquisitions Post Mortem*, London, 9 Edward II, no. 583.
- Edwards, K. J. - Hamond, F. W. - Simms, A. 1983*: The medieval settlement of Newcastle Lyons, Co. Dublin: an interdisciplinary approach, *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 83C, 351-376.
- Evans, E. E. 1957*: *Irish Folk Ways*. London.
- Frame, R. 1974-5*: The Bruces in Ireland, 1315-18, *Irish Historical Studies* 19, 3-37.
- Glasscock, R. E. 1970*: Moated sites and deserted boroughs and villages: two neglected aspects of Anglo-Norman settlement in Ireland. In: *Stephens, N. - Glasscock, R. E. (eds.): Irish Geographical Studies*. Belfast, 162-177.

- Graham, B. J. 1993: The High Middle Ages: c.1100 to c. 1350. In: Graham, B. J. - Proudfoot, L. J. (eds.): An Historical Geography of Ireland. London, 58-98.*
- Hamlin, A. (ed.) 1983: Historic Monuments of Northern Ireland. Belfast.*
- Hayes-McCoy, G. A. (ed.) 1964: Ulster and other Irish Maps, c. 1602. Dublin.*
- Long, H. 1994: Three Settlements of Gaelic Wicklow: Rathgall, Ballinacor and Glendalough. In: Hannigan, K. - Nolan, W. (eds.): Wicklow: History and Society. Dublin, 237-266.*
- McNeill, C. (ed.) 1950: Calendar of Archbishop Alen's Register. Dublin.*
- O'Kelly, M. J. 1989: Early Ireland: An Introduction to Irish Prehistory. Cambridge.*
- Otway-Ruthven, A. J. 1965: The character of Norman settlement in Ireland, Historical Studies 5, 75-84.*
- Rynne, E. 1963: Some destroyed sites at Shannon Airport, Co. Clare, Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy 63C, 245-277.*
- Smyth, W. 1985: Property, patronage and population: reconstructing the human geography of mid-seventeenth century County Tipperary. In: Nolan, W. (ed.): Tipperary: History and Society. Dublin, 104-138.*

Acknowledgements

The Office of Public Works for permission to reproduce the plan of Piperstown, and the Department of Folklore, University College Dublin for the distribution map of Irish tower houses. I would also like to thank Ms. Annaba Kilfeather for re-drawing *Figures 1* and *2*.

The support of the Cultural Relations Committee of the Department of Foreign Affairs is also greatly appreciated.

Abbreviations

OD - Ordnance Datum