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Home is Where the Heart(h) is....?

Karen Dempsey explores medieval houses in Ireland 1100-1600 AD

During the period 1100–1600 AD, Ireland, like many other places across Europe, experienced cultural upheavals, population displacement, invasions and settlement. Ireland was ‘home’ to many people with different identities, ethnicities, genders and social status. From nobles and those within religious orders to clerks, brewers and merchants as well as a range of labourers and craftworkers. Yet, studies typically concentrate on high-status homes (castles) or religious institutions (monasteries), and few explorations have been made of where or how ordinary women, men and children lived. Consequently, it remains the case that in medieval archaeology, the past is told through the stories of ‘big men’. In Ireland, this ranges from Brian Boru to Strongbow and Cromwell. What is left out of these ‘grand narratives’ are the daily lives of ordinary people, in particular women and those who lived on the margins of elite society, e.g. the laundress, leather-worker or the even the village ale-wife.

Despite the obvious fact that most people lived in houses rather than elite-residences, scholarship has not pursued stories of this domestic sphere. Are houses deemed less important to interpretations of the past? Optimistically, it is hoped that the lack of scholarly attention paid to ordinary medieval houses in Ireland when compared with castles, cathedrals or religious institutions, is because those high-status buildings are still visible in the landscape today. But, perhaps it is telling that there is no comprehensive study of medieval houses and households in later medieval Ireland. Previously, a lack of evidence may have impeded such research; however, large amounts of relevant archaeological data were recorded during Ireland’s recent economic boom that have not been fully explored. Over the past sixty years in Britain and continental Europe, a tradition of scholarship on ordinary medieval houses has developed. This shows us that houses formed the infrastructure of medieval households for peasants, labourers and craftworkers who lived in cities, towns, villages, and rural dispersed settings (Fig. 1). However, there has been remarkably little explorations of daily-life because these studies have largely focused on empirical surveys of physical remains, multi-scalar landscape analysis, as well as explorations of social practice based on spatial arrangement of households.

Yet, the home is central to understanding the human past because it is where the maintenance activities associated with daily-life were carried out: preparing and cooking food, the socialisation of children as well as birth and death of people. That is not to say that ‘home’ is homogenous or stable across time and space. We cannot assume homes or households of the medieval world mirror our modern iterations. It is necessary to examine how (or even if) the cultural and social practices of

medieval life from religious belief to the production, learning and reinforcement of gendered roles were shaped by or within the home and household (Gilchrist 2012).

A unique opportunity now exists to address this gap in our knowledge by analysing new and old archaeological evidence to fully understand what later medieval houses looked like, what they contained, where they were located and who lived in them. Unlike early-medieval archaeology, many later-medieval discoveries remain confined to unpublished archaeological reports. These contain detailed information on medieval houses: date, size, orientation, construction material, floor levels, artefacts, hearth-contents and positioning e.g. Mondaniel, Co. Cork (Quinn 2006; Fig 2).

My current research project 'Home is Where the Heart(h) is' (funded by the Irish Research Council) investigates ordinary medieval houses and households (e.g. those below the rank of castle or high-status residence) in later-medieval Ireland 1100-1600 AD. A key objective is to understand archaeological expressions of ordinary medieval homes in Ireland including urban and rural houses, and but also less well-understood households such as moated sites (e.g. Coolamurray, Co. Wexford or Ballinvinnny, Co. Cork). The collation and analysis of available evidence can answer questions about continuity and change in these houses across time and space i.e. are they of sill beam and trench or of post construction. These results will establish a firmer chronology for later-medieval houses (1100-1600 AD) incorporating C14 results and period-specific pottery. The data (houses and material culture) will be analysed in terms of context, use, function to give a firmer idea of the lifeways of those living in these buildings including their use of space. This means re-analysing evidence to understand social and cultural practices in order to add to the detailed descriptions currently available. These new strands of evidence enable evidence-based narratives that account for the micro-scale of daily-life, which enriches our understanding of medieval households.

The findings from the archaeological analysis will be considered in combination with appropriate historical sources including literature and folklore-studies, an underutilised resource despite its relevance to medieval archaeology. By setting ordinary medieval households within their appropriate historical context, utilising comparative work from across Europe, it is possible to examine how different people in the past organised their houses and what shaped their decisions. Questions include: how people 'made a house a home' in later medieval Ireland? What things (objects) were used in the creation of households? How was daily-life structured and experienced? It is about focussing on the different ways in which medieval people by virtue of their houses and things, created their own distinctive household.

Architecture, material culture or spatial arrangements of households can communicate various aspects of identity. For example, were houses structured differently depending on cultural identity

i.e. Anglo-Norman or Gaelic-Irish? Eamon Cotter (2005) noted that the material culture of a moated site he excavated at Ballinvinny South, Co Cork was no different to that expected in contemporary 'English' households. Is this similarity because of the shared ethnicity of the site's occupants or is it that these finds constitutes a common assemblage of pottery and ironwork we might come to expect of this type of medieval household? (Fig. 3). Relatedly, there is scope to explore the 'two-nation' narrative of later-medieval Ireland. What is the archaeological evidence to support divergent Gaelic-Irish or Anglo-Norman identities? Or are these possible differences only a concern for elites? While slightly later in date Audrey Horning's work on the Dungiven Costume suggests complex understanding of what social and cultural cues are transmitted by the things worn, used or made (2014).

Contextual evidence from medieval Europe including folklore and history indicates women played a leading role in household management, caring and healing (Gilchrist 2012). Drawing on insights from the tradition of household archaeology, it will be possible to investigate the evidence for craftwork and food-production. But what else can the archaeological record tell us of gendered roles in the household? Are there particular gendered tasks beyond craft working and food production for medieval men and women within the home? Or, do we see more evidence for differing practices related to lifecycles of people and the changing seasonal demands of the household? (Fig 4).

Belief, normative or otherwise strongly shaped the medieval world. We know that medieval people went on pilgrimage, prayed to particular saints and also celebrated many church festivals. The religious calendar was integrated with daily life, but what archaeological traces have been left by particular ritual and material practices of religious belief, institutional and folk, in the household? The respective discoveries of a Roman coin in house foundations at Mullaghmast, Co. Kildare and a broken rotary quern at Mondaniel, Co. Cork, suggests households in Ireland shared the wider European ritual practice of 'special deposits', where particular objects were deposited in particular places for apotropaic or reasons related to belief (Bolger 2018; Quinn 2006). The placement of the decorated rotary quern close is particularly interesting as it was adjacent to a possible entrance. It may have demarcated this threshold as an important junction (Quinn 2006). Grinding grain and subsequent bread making are interwoven with women's gendered roles and devotional practices so perhaps this may be read as a gendered special deposit. Irish folklore details a wide range of depositional activities in the early-modern period. Was this activity widespread in premodern Ireland?

What about the emotional lives of medieval people? Recent work by Eleanor Standley (2019) discusses the emotive significance of the deposition of a plough coulter within a fifteenth-century

house foundation at a deserted medieval hamlet in Alnhamshales (Northumberland). The material it was constructed of – iron – is thought to have had a protective and charm-like function in the medieval world (Gilchrist 2020, 138). This object was much earlier than the house, belonging to the period just after the Norman Conquest in Britain. A plough coulter might typically be associated with men or men's work. Its presence in the house foundation may not create a gendered connection but captures, and perhaps evokes, notions of what a household encapsulated: both work and home rather than a binary opposition of inside v outside. It can represent the sowing of new life, but also endings and death. Houses like people had their own lives. Addressing new questions to the archaeological evidence will deliver a more socially diverse picture of medieval households that encompasses family life and gender roles but also life cycles. Other questions explored will include: What evokes feeling of home? Has this changed over time? What does home mean?

The results of this project will be shared through a book, public talks and a short documentary that will feature new understandings of medieval households. The documentary aims to demonstrate the relevance of archaeology to contemporary communities. It will explore the folklore and traditions of the nineteenth and twentieth-century Ireland, which while not assumed to directly related to medieval Ireland may have comparative value (Fig. 5). Experts from sociology, folklore, archaeology and occupational health as well as older people living in care and their own homes will feature. These ethnographic interviews will provide invaluable generational knowledge of 'home'. Disappointingly, the elderly people in our communities are often excluded from heritage activities. This project creates an opportunity to as promote inter-generational learning, and enabling the sharing of rich ideas of home and the things associated with it.

'Home is Where the Heart(h) is' places an emphasis on telling people-centred stories from a gendered perspective, inclusive of the past and the present. Creating an understanding of daily-life can be complicated but by combining evidence of people, places and things, a better understanding of households can be achieved in later medieval Ireland that resonates with a contemporary audience. Altogether, a more holistic picture of the variety of social and cultural practices of later-medieval households in Ireland will be captured.

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knows of other excavated medieval houses in Ireland to get in touch @karrycrow or kdempsey@nuigalway.ie

Biography: Dr Karen Dempsey

I am a medieval archaeologist interested in the lived experiences of people in the past. My current IRC post-doc project is based in the Dept of Archaeology, NUI Galway where I work with Dr Kieran O’Conor.

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Figures



Fig.1 Mill Farm Cottage, Mapledurham, Oxfordshire. Cruckbuilt c. 1335. Photo by Sue McArdle.

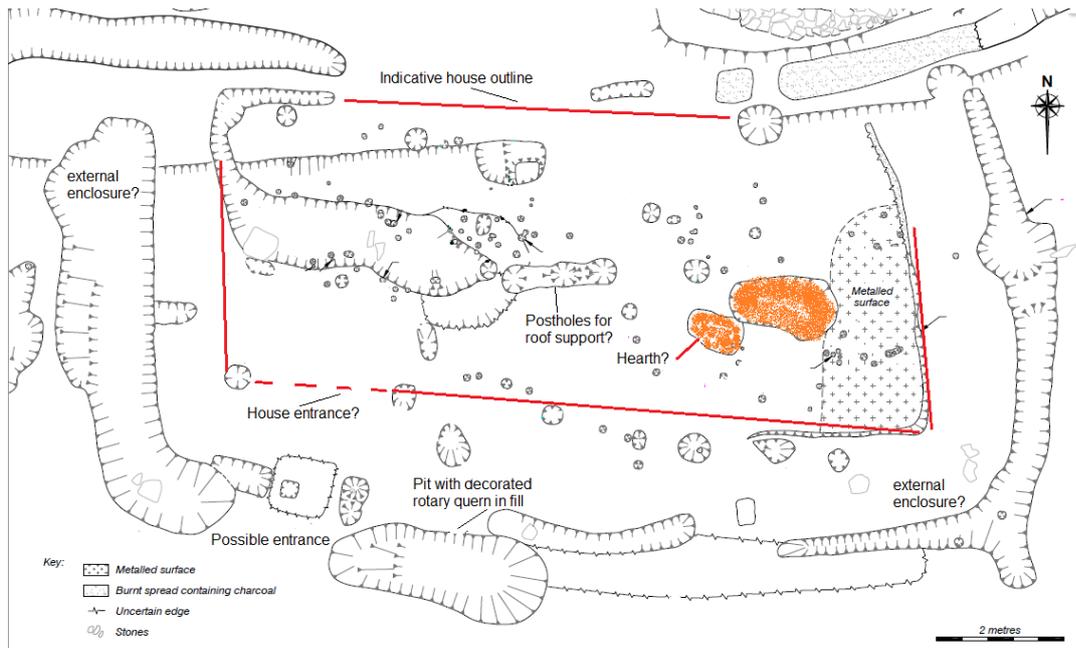


Fig.2 House Site, Mondaniel, Co. Cork. After Quinn 2006.



Fig 3. Saintonge Pottery from a moated site at Ballinviny, Cork (Cotter 2005).



Fig 4. The Luttrell Psalter (1325-1340 AD). Add MS 4213 Fol172v miniature. Image of women harvesting. Courtesy of the British Library.

http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Add_MS_42130



Fig. 5. Traditional thatched cottage on Inis Mór, Aran Islands, Co. Galway. Author's Own.